

A NEW TACTIC FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH IRAN:  
FAITH-BASED DIPLOMACY

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE  
General Studies

by

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## ABSTRACT

A NEW TACTIC FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH IRAN: FAITH-BASED DIPLOMACY,  
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The Islamic Republic of Iran poses a significant threat to stability in the Middle East. Iran's nuclear program, inflammatory rhetoric, and support to militias challenge peace efforts throughout the region. America now seeks normalized relations with Iran in order to steer the Islamic Regime towards cooperative behaviors. Upon taking office in 2008, President Barack Obama opened the door for direct engagement between Washington and Tehran. So far, rapprochement efforts are hindered by one-sided agendas and each nation's domestic politics. It is still to be determined if the Obama Administration will enhance diplomatic tactics with Iran.

Throughout the Middle East and particularly in Iran, Islam has pervaded state politics. In Iran, supreme authority rests with an Islamic cleric and the state clergy control many of the governing institutions. The findings of this study suggest that faith-based diplomacy with Iran's clerical establishment could invigorate rapprochement efforts. Faith-based diplomacy draws from the peacemaking tenets within all religious traditions to evoke respectful relationships, mutual understanding, and tolerance which are often under-developed during traditional diplomacy. It is the superior way to socialize diplomats with more cooperative strategic mind-sets and a divine authority's inspiration to reconcile differences.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE THESIS APPROVAL PAGE .....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	viii
TABLES .....	ix
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background.....	1
The Thesis.....	5
Methodology.....	6
Literature Review .....	9
Definitions .....	12
CHAPTER 2 HISTORY OF IRAN–U.S. RELATIONS.....	15
Recent History .....	16
1953 Coup.....	16
1979 Hostage Crisis .....	17
Iran-Iraq War (1980 to 1988).....	20
Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq .....	22
U.S. Policy with Iran.....	25
Official Dialogue .....	27
Summary.....	29
CHAPTER 3 ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN IRAN.....	32
State and Religion.....	32
Traditional Roles.....	34
Quietism to Activism .....	36
Iran’s Constitutional Powers.....	38
Democratic and Islamic Institutions .....	39
Informal Authority in Iran’s Government .....	43
The Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).....	43
<i>Bonyads</i> (Charitable Foundations).....	45
The Clergy .....	46
Political Factions.....	48
Summary.....	49

CHAPTER 4 FAITH-BASED DIPLOMACY .....	52
Faith-Based Diplomacy .....	53
Purpose.....	53
Application and Underlying Principles.....	55
Limitations .....	57
Examples.....	57
Religious Leader Engagement.....	59
Policy .....	59
Roles .....	61
Official Institutions .....	63
President.....	63
Congress.....	64
State Department.....	66
Military .....	66
International Government Organizations.....	68
Vatican .....	68
United Nations .....	70
Unofficial Institutions .....	71
American Clergy.....	71
Non-Governmental Organizations.....	72
Summary .....	73
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	76
Summary of Findings.....	77
Conclusions.....	81
Strengths of Faith-Based Diplomacy .....	81
Application to Iran-U.S. Estrangement.....	81
Enhanced Peacebuilding Techniques.....	82
Use of Spiritually Inspired Diplomats .....	83
Weaknesses of Faith-Based Diplomacy.....	84
Middle East History and Ideology .....	84
Iran’s Domestic Politics.....	85
Iran’s Supreme Leader and Clerical Establishment.....	86
U.S. Domestic Politics .....	88
Spoilers .....	91
Recommendations.....	91
The Process .....	93
Plan .....	93
Prepare .....	94
Execute and Assess .....	95
APPENDIX A LEADING INSTITUTIONS TO SUPPORT FAITH-BASED DIPLOMACY .....	98

American Clergy and Islamic Organizations.....	98
State Department.....	99
Non-Governmental Organizations.....	101
APPENDIX B WORLDVIEW OF IRAN’S POLITICAL FACTIONS AND KEY ELITES .....	105
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	106
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST .....	115

## ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Figure 1. Policy Options with Iran.....	27
Figure 2. Religion and State for the Twelve Largest Muslim Countries .....	34
Figure 3. Distribution of Constitutional Powers in the Islamic Republic.....	39
Figure 4. Networks and the Multi-tiered Structure of the Islamic Republic .....	42
Figure 5. Political Factions and Key Personalities in the Islamic Republic .....	49
Figure 6. Three Stages to Faith-Based Diplomacy. ....	55
Figure 7. Roles of Governmental Organizations (official), Non-Governmental Organizations (unofficial), and International Organizations in Faith-Based Diplomacy.....	62



## TABLES

	Page
Table 1. Principles of Faith-Based Diplomacy .....	56

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Any government that chooses to be an ally of terror, such as Syria or Iran, has chosen to be an enemy of freedom, justice, and peace. The world must hold those regimes to account.

— President George W. Bush  
*National Security Strategy 2006*

In addition to its illicit nuclear program, it continues to support terrorism, undermine peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and deny its people their universal rights. Many years of refusing to engage Iran failed to reverse these trends; on the contrary, Iran's behavior became more threatening. Engagement is something we pursue without illusion. It can offer Iran a pathway to a better future, provided Iran's leaders are prepared to take it.

—President Barack Obama,  
*National Security Strategy 2010*

### Background

One of the most brutal dictatorships in the world is Iran. Iran is the world's largest Shi'a Islamic state and competes with Egypt and Turkey for the Middle East's largest Muslim community. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the United States has maintained minimal diplomatic contact with Iran.<sup>1</sup> Relations warmed in 2001-2003 as both nations pursued seemingly common interests in Afghanistan and Iraq, then quickly soured in 2006-2007 due to Iran's nuclear program and support to Hezbollah in Lebanon, anti-American militias in Iraq, and the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> Now, the international

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 18 April 2011, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL32048.pdf> (accessed 13 May 2011), 45.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth M. Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia? Options for a New American Strategy Toward Iran* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2009), 6-7.

community is demanding drastic changes in Iran's behavior. Within Iran, the re-emergence of a strong reformist movement in 2009 and Iran's declining economy has sparked an internal debate over engagement, and possible accommodation, with the West. Despite these increasing pressures on Iran's government, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's arrogant speech during the 2010 meeting of the United Nations General Assembly signaled that Iran will continue to risk isolation in order to protect its national rights.<sup>3</sup>

Iran is the most significant threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Iran's nuclear program, inflammatory rhetoric, and destabilizing activities throughout the region undermine the efforts of the United States and others for peace, security, and development. Iran's nefarious activities include: support to violent extremist groups (Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq); subversion of U.S. regional allies (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and Bahrain); spoiling Arab-Israeli peace activities; and development of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>5</sup> A nuclear-armed Iran could embolden Iran in its support of terrorist organizations, start an

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<sup>3</sup>Al Jazeera News, "UN walkout over Ahmadinejad speech," 24 September 2010, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/americas/2010/09/2010923184345332707.html> (accessed 13 May 2011).

<sup>4</sup>Jim Garamone, "Mullen discusses DoD's way ahead for 2011," *Fort Leavenworth Lamp*, 6 January 2011, [http://www.ftleavenworthlamp.com/news/around\\_the\\_force/x1926722070/Mullen-discusses-DoD-s-way-ahead-for-2011](http://www.ftleavenworthlamp.com/news/around_the_force/x1926722070/Mullen-discusses-DoD-s-way-ahead-for-2011) (accessed 1 May 2011).

<sup>5</sup>Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia?*, 13-14.

arms race in the Middle East, and make Iran increasingly confrontational with the West.<sup>6</sup> In the worst scenario, Iran could direct a nuclear attack against the U.S. homeland.

Upon taking Office in 2009, President Barack Obama's national security strategy opened the door for direct engagement between Washington and Tehran and suggested a peaceful path to the resolution of differences.<sup>7</sup> An Iranian news website reported that Tehran received two letters from President Obama in 2009 to explain this policy.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the Obama Administration has encouraged Iran to attend several regional summit meetings, to include meetings on Afghanistan in 2009.<sup>9</sup> So far, Iran has ignored President Obama's offers.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, meetings in 2010 and 2011 between Iran and permanent members of the UN Security Council sought cooperation on Iran's nuclear program, but produced no concessions. In light of these events, U.S. prospects to engage Iran have diminished.<sup>11</sup> Persuading Iran through economic sanctions and UN Resolutions,

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>7</sup>White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss\\_viewer/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf) (accessed 13 May 2011), 26.

<sup>8</sup>Borzou Daragahi et al., "Iran: Report of a second letter from Obama to Tehran," *Los Angeles Times*, World Section, 2 September 2009, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2009/09/iran-report-of-secret-letter-from-obama-to-tehran.html> (accessed 1 May 2010).

<sup>9</sup>Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," 48-49.

<sup>10</sup>Marc Lynch, "Upheaval: U.S. Policy Toward Iran in a Changing Middle East," Center for New American Strategy, June 2011, [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_Upheaval\\_Lynch\\_2.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_Upheaval_Lynch_2.pdf) (accessed 1 May 2011), 11.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 11.

the long-standing U.S. strategy, has been ineffective and therefore risks military escalation in the coming years.<sup>12</sup>

It is yet to be seen how the Obama Administration will adjust its policy toward Iran to yield desirable results, and how Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia will respond to a U.S. policy seeking better Iran-U.S. relations. Many experts, including former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, believe that U.S. interests in the Middle East would benefit greatly from normalized relations with Iran and therefore necessitate bold new steps towards rapprochement. With the change in regimes in the Middle East resulting from the 2011 “Arab Spring,” the United States has found it necessary to increase leadership and diplomacy in this region of the world.<sup>13</sup> Iran is increasingly vulnerable too, as these popular uprisings have demonstrated intolerance for authoritarian systems like Iran’s.<sup>14</sup> By leading North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military operations against pro-Qaddafi forces in Libya, President Obama has also demonstrated the ability to minimize diplomacy in favor of more pressuring tactics when brutal regimes act violently.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Flynt Leverett and Hillary M. Leverett, “The Fog of Containment,” *Foreign Policy*, 15 November 2010, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/15/the\\_fog\\_of\\_containment](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/15/the_fog_of_containment) (accessed 21 November 2010).

<sup>13</sup>The 2011 Arab Spring includes overthrows of autocratic regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, and on-going uprisings in Bahrain, Libya, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen.

<sup>14</sup>Lynch, “Upheaval: U.S. Policy Toward Iran in a Changing Middle East,” 11.

<sup>15</sup>David E. Sanger, “The Larger Game: Iran,” *New York Times*, 3 April 2011, Week in Review Section, 1, 4.

## The Thesis

Religion has increasingly merged with state politics throughout much of the Muslim world. Religious leaders play key roles in world politics today, such as Pope Benedict XVI for human rights and the Dalai Lama for the welfare of the Tibetan people. The Islamic Republic of Iran is an extreme case where the government and political system are rooted in religious laws and values. Supreme authority rests with one Islamic cleric and religious institutions supervise all of the government's actions. Other declared Islamic Republics in the region—Afghanistan and Pakistan—further exemplify the influence of religion in politics throughout the Middle East and South Asia.

Shortly after taking office in 2009, President Obama announced his goal to reduce historical tensions with Muslim communities throughout the world.<sup>16</sup> To pursue this goal, U.S. diplomacy is reaching beyond governments directly to the citizens of a nation.<sup>17</sup> However, this strategy does not mandate engagement with influential religious leaders. Faith-based diplomacy, a form of unofficial diplomacy performed by religiously inspired peacemakers, has emerged as an effective component to conflict mediation with Muslim communities. A framework to perform faith-based diplomacy with successful outcomes is presented in works by Douglas Johnston of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy and Canon Trond Bakkevig of the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land. This thesis argues that faith-based diplomacy is a potentially effective tactic of engagement with Iran to begin the process of rapprochement. Faith-based diplomacy

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<sup>16</sup>White House, "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning," 4 June 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09> (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>17</sup>White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, 11.

complements the overall diplomatic effort by first creating favorable mind-sets necessary for cooperation. The following four premises provide the basis for the validity of this thesis:

1. Building productive relationships with Iran that evoke trust and understanding is profoundly challenged by on-going hostilities, historical mistrust, and the absence of diplomatic contact for over 30 years.

2. Iran's clergy is influential within Iran's government and society and can affect Iran's domestic and foreign policies.

3. The application of faith-based diplomacy to the prolonged Iran-U.S. estrangement will contribute (is suitable) to breaking the diplomatic deadlock.<sup>18</sup>

4. Faith-based diplomacy with Iran is both acceptable and feasible.<sup>19</sup>

This thesis has implications for engagements throughout the Muslim world, which could also benefit from the inclusion of religious leaders in diplomatic efforts.

### Methodology

To determine if faith-based diplomacy is a suitable tactic to engage Iran and begin rapprochement, this study is structured to answer three supporting questions.

1. What are the historical causes of tension between Iran and the United States?

2. What is the role of Iran's clergy in politics, and are clerics capable of influencing Iran's foreign and domestic policies?

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<sup>18</sup>—Suitable” refers to effectively achieving the desired goals, in this case, beginning the process of rapprochement with Iran.

<sup>19</sup>—Acceptable” refers to adherence to laws of the United States and fitting to the circumstances. —Feasible” refers to having the resources and knowledge to perform faith-based diplomacy.

### 3. Is faith-based diplomacy an acceptable and feasible tactic given U.S. policies and capabilities?

In chapter 2, events that stoked the Iran-U.S. estrangement are presented as lingering obstacles to improved relations. Beginning with the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup in Iran, and exacerbated by events associated with the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran-U.S. tensions have never subsided. Chapter 2 presents the Obama Administration's diplomatic strategy with Iran, and recounts the most recent official Iran-U.S. dialogue in Turkey. Together, the analysis of history and current policy suggest that traditional forms of diplomacy, alone, with Iran are prone to fail.

Chapter 3 examines the history of religion in politics and the current role of the clergy in Iran. A section on the tradition of Islam and the rise of Shi'a activism sets a foundation for understanding "Khomeini-ism," a form of political Islam that guides Iran's government. This chapter presents Iran's government structure in detail, in order to understand both the formal and informal powers of the clergy. Iran's other competing power centers, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), *bonyads* (charitable foundations), and political factions, are described to understand the competitiveness within Iran's politics. Analysis of Iran's power politics, at the end of chapter 3, suggests the need to socialize the clergy in new, favorable mind-sets to change Iran's behavior.

In chapter 4, faith-based diplomacy is described to understand its unique application and superior qualities to traditional forms of diplomacy. Chapter 4 defines U.S. policy on faith-based diplomacy based on official strategies and the actions of government institutions. This chapter then reviews government and non-government actors and institutions capable of supporting faith-based diplomacy. Analysis from



chapter 4 addresses the acceptability and feasibility to conduct faith-based diplomacy with Iran, leaving the explanation of suitability for chapter 5.

Chapter 5, “Conclusions and Recommendation,” examines the major findings in this study. Analysis of faith-based diplomacy in the context of the Iran-U.S. estrangement suggests its applicability to begin the process of rapprochement, and also the acceptability and feasibility of a potential new U.S. project with Iran. This chapter considers strengths and weaknesses of faith-based diplomacy with Iran to fully understand the challenges of this engagement tactic. The recommendations and supporting appendices present a general outline for a way forward on an Iran project.

Engaging Iran is vital to achieving stability in the Middle East and therefore new tactics of engagement warrant review by regional experts. Due to constraints on research time, this study limited its scope to Iran, when it could have analyzed faith-based diplomacy throughout the Muslim world. Given the challenge of Iran, successes with faith-based diplomacy here would provide support for a more comprehensive faith-based approach to the Muslim world.

This study relies on the writings of Iranian, Islamic, and Middle Eastern scholars, mainly those that publish from U.S. universities and policy institutes. The recent launch of the “Iran Primer” lecture series by the U.S. Institute of Peace and Woodrow Wilson Institute was beneficial to capture expert opinion and analysis for this study. A number of interviews with policy experts, negotiators, Iranians, and Islamic advocates provided important insights about Iran and faith-based diplomacy. Sources from Israel, Europe, Iran, and Muslim communities were largely not used due to limited research time. Their exclusion limited important perspectives on this subject. The content in websites of

Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Foreign Ministry, and Iranian state media were generally not used either.<sup>20</sup> Additional interviews with Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and Canon Trond Bakkevig, both respected faith-based diplomats, and former Ambassador John Limbert and Qom learned Mehdi Khalaji, experts on Iran's political elites and clergy, would add depth to this argument from their expert analysis.<sup>21</sup>

### Literature Review

The subjects of Iran, Islam, and international diplomacy are popular today within both government circles and civil society. From the multitude of credible writings on these subjects, this thesis draws from only a few sources that appear favored by the U.S. government and respected policy institutions. At the end of the research process, ten sources emerged as the best for a contemporary understanding of Iran-U.S. relations, political Islam, and faith-based diplomacy.

Three sources provided sufficient detail and analysis to understand the events and policies that shaped the current Iran-U.S. enmity. *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy* edited by Robin Wright covers a wide-range of subjects on Iran, including 10

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<sup>20</sup>Ayatollah Khamenei, Website, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/> (accessed 1 May 2011).

<sup>21</sup>For superb writings on Iran's clerical establishment and negotiating with Iran, see: Mehdi Khalaji, "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2006, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus59final.pdf> (accessed 1 May 2011); John W. Limbert, "Negotiating with the Islamic Republic of Iran," United States Institute of Peace, January 2008, <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr199.pdf> (accessed 1 May 2011).

sections devoted to Iran-U.S. relations and U.S. policy options toward Iran.<sup>22</sup> *The Iran Primer* is also available on-line, hosted by the U.S. Institute of Peace where it is regularly updated to ensure its relevance to contemporary issues. For a more detailed understanding of policy options with Iran, this thesis relied on *Which Path to Persia? Options for a New American Strategy Toward Iran* edited by Kenneth Pollack and published by the Brookings Institute.<sup>23</sup> The nine most compelling policy options toward Iran are compared to help inform the government debate. A lecture series by Dr. Abbas Milani, Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University, was insightful and served to help develop the framework to chapter 2.<sup>24</sup> Milani in “Nukes, Kooks, and Democracy in Iran,” and “Obama and Iran,” develops his theory that democratization of Iran is the only certain way to change Iran’s behavior, and he opines that the United States has never had a strategy towards Iran, only reactions to the most pressing concerns.

To understand the role of religious leaders in Iran and the historical events leading up to Iran’s Islamic revolution, this thesis relied upon four sources. In *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics*, L. Carl Brown presents the Muslim approach to

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<sup>22</sup>Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010).

<sup>23</sup>Kenneth M. Pollack, et al., *Which Path to Persia? Options for a New American Strategy Toward Iran* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2009).

<sup>24</sup>Abbas Milani; “Nukes, Kooks, and Democracy in Iran,” Stanford: Classes Without Quizzes, 12 November 2007, <http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/nukes-kooks-democracy-in-iran/id385577095?i=85423188> (accessed 1 May 2011); Milani “Obama and Iran,” Stanford: Classes Without Quizzes, 9 September 2009, <http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/obama-and-iran/id385577095?i=85423192> (accessed 1 May 2011).

politics from Muhammad to today.<sup>25</sup> Brown's description of a quietist tradition of Islam and politics, followed by a twentieth century transformation to activism and radicalism, is accepted by other notable experts on Islam, such as John Esposito in *Unholy War*, Reza Aslan in *No god but God*, and Shireen Hunter in *The Future of Islam and the West*. For understanding of Iran's government and the role of the clergy, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics* by David E. Thaler of the RAND Corporation and Kenneth Katzman's report for Congress, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," were studied for their elaborate detail on Iran.<sup>26</sup> For the most in-depth analysis of Iran's clergy, this thesis turned to writings by Mehdi Khalaji in *The Iran Primer* and "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism," published by the Washington Institute for Near East policy. In these two sources, Iran's clerical establishment is depicted as a state-like institution, accountable to the government, and void of traditional independence.

To develop the features of faith-based diplomacy, this thesis relied on three sources, Douglas Johnston's *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik*, Dalia Dassa Kaye's *Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia*, and Canon Trond Bakkevig's "Religious dialogue and the quest for peace in the Middle

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<sup>25</sup>L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>26</sup>Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 18 April 2011, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL32048.pdf> (accessed 1 May 2011); David E. Thaler, et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010).

East.”<sup>27</sup> Johnstons and Bakkevig’s writings present leading doctrine for the conduct of faith-based diplomacy and provide analysis of faith-based diplomacy’s advantages over traditional forms of diplomacy. Kaye’s work is published by the RAND Corporation and describes a methodology for unofficial diplomacy. Kaye’s analysis states that entrenched security cooperation agreements challenge all diplomatic efforts in the Middle East.

### Definitions

The following section defines key terms used in this study and may serve to enhance the reader’s understanding.

Ayatollah: The title “~~ay~~atollah” is earned by revered religious scholars in Shi’a Islam to distinguish their authority to interpret religious texts. Ayatollahs form the upper echelons of Shiite clergy and maintain economic networks and have great social popularity. Their followers transcend nation-state boundaries and adhere to the ayatollah’s published teachings and religious edicts that address all aspects of Muslim life. The title “~~g~~rand ayatollah” is reserved for the most revered scholars who reside at Shi’a education centers like Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran. There are 69 living ayatollahs (used synonymously with “~~m~~arjas”) listed within Wikipedia though this number is

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<sup>27</sup>Trond Bakkevig, “Religious dialogue and the quest for peace in the Middle East,” Norwegian Peacebuilding Center, February 2011, [http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow\\_site/storage/original/application/e954e530c0f574c541b70ad7e0cc1568.pdf](http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/e954e530c0f574c541b70ad7e0cc1568.pdf) (accessed 1 May 2011); Douglas Johnston, ed., *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007).

widely-disputed based on the informal credentialing process; most ayatollahs reside in Iran or Iraq, with the remainder residing in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Canada.<sup>28</sup>

Clerical Establishment: This term describes Iran's state (government) and non-state clergy. State clergy refers to the Supreme Leader, Friday Prayer Leaders and the clerics within the Assembly of Experts, Expediency Council, Guardian Council, Judiciary, and other constitutionally empowered positions. Non-state clergy mainly reside in Qom seminaries and benefit from government stipends in-return for supporting government policies and ideology.

Diplomacy: This term describes the engagements between two opposing parties pursuing their self-interests. Official diplomacy, also called track one diplomacy, includes diplomats that have the authority to negotiate policies, treaties, and agreements on behalf of governments. Unofficial diplomacy, track two, involves a variety of indirect methods to pursue interests by first socializing cooperative thinking.

Faith-based Diplomacy: Faith-based diplomacy is unofficial diplomacy and typically occurs through religious leader engagements. Faith-based diplomacy can also include theologically inspired laity and government sponsors. This track of diplomacy is described in chapter 4.

Iranian Regime: This term describes the powerful elites that govern the Islamic Republic of Iran. It implies the cronyism and informal networks which pervade Iran's system of government.

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<sup>28</sup>Wikipedia, "List of current Maraji," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_current\\_Maraji](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_current_Maraji) (accessed 26 September 2010).

Middle East: Description of the geographic region combining Western Asia and North Africa. This region includes among many others, the Muslim nations of Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

National security interests: A formal list of strategic goals defined in the 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS). The NSS lists four enduring national interests: security, prosperity, values, and international order. Included under the topic of security are the following interests: advance peace, security, and opportunity in the Middle East; reverse the spread of nuclear and biological weapons and secure nuclear materials; disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa‘ida and its violent extremist affiliates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and around the world.<sup>29</sup>

Realpolitik: This term describes diplomatic practices that achieve political, economic, and security gains in relation to another actor.

Rule of the jurisprudent: This term describes the defining feature of Iran’s political system. Following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini introduced rule by the Supreme Leader, a religious jurisprudent, who would have authority to oversee all policies of government. The constitutional powers of the Supreme Leader are superior to the president and all other political leaders. This form of government continues today in Iran and is described in chapter 3.

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<sup>29</sup>White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, 18-28.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY OF IRAN–U.S. RELATIONS

Iran is a nation that has the potential to destabilize the Middle East through its purported nuclear program, sponsorship of terrorism, human rights violations, and rhetoric.<sup>30</sup> Iran's history as the Persian Empire dates to 500 BC, and since 1500 it has been the world's predominate Shi'a state.<sup>31</sup> Iran is one of the few nations that remained independent of colonial rule after World War I; however, it was heavily influenced by Russia and the British Empire in the 20th Century as they competed for Iran's bountiful oil reserves. Iran's actions throughout the twentieth century reflect strong nationalism and a desire to reject encroachment on its natural resources and culture. Several historical events since 1953 shaped the current Iran-U.S. enmity. The 1953 CIA-sponsored coup in Iran, the 1979 Iranian Revolution and American hostage crisis, and the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s still inspire animosity in the minds of political elites in both Iran and the United States. Mutual suspicion and mistrust reached a peak following the 1979 hostage crisis and resulted in a break in diplomatic relations. Competition in Iraq since 2003, in which Iranian supported militias have killed American soldiers, spoiled recent diplomatic efforts toward rapprochement. To successfully set the conditions for normal relations and

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<sup>30</sup>Robin Wright, "The Challenge of Iran," in *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. by Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>31</sup>John B. Alterman, "The Real Shi'a-Sunni Conflict," CSIS Middle East Notes and Commentary, [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/0307\\_menc.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/0307_menc.pdf) (accessed 1 April 2011).



rapprochement, diplomatic efforts must first address deep-seated tensions and historical mistrust.

### Recent History

#### 1953 Coup

U.S. support for Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, during his 38 years of rule (1941 to 1979) was based largely on his opposition to Communism and Soviet expansion in the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> The Shah also supported peaceful relations with Israel and settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute, policies which supported U.S. interests in the Middle East and made Iran a valued partner against Arab aggression. However, many Iranians viewed the Shah as corrupt and his secularization and modernization initiatives as a detriment to Iranian society. In August 1953, a popular uprising forced the Shah into exile and elevated the widely respected Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh to national leadership.

Mossadegh was at the center of democratic activism in Iran. Mossadegh's policies, especially his effort to nationalize Iran's oil industry, were viewed favorably in Iran, but opposed by Great Britain and the United States. Great Britain feared an end to cheap oil imports and profits from Iranian oil reserves, and the United States feared Mossadegh would allow Communism to take hold in Iran. The United States and Great Britain quickly joined efforts to remove Mossadegh and return the Shah to power. The CIA funded and directed the actions of a pro-monarchy coup to dispose of Mossadegh. The successful operation returned the Shah to power and secured his greater control over

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<sup>32</sup>Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," 1.

Iran's governing institutions.<sup>33</sup> The key consequences of U.S. and British intervention were stopping Iran's democratic movement and twenty-five years of despotic rule by the Shah.<sup>34</sup> For many middle-aged Iranians, the 1979 Revolution and hostage crisis were long-overdue responses to Western meddling since 1953.

### 1979 Hostage Crisis

The 1979 Iranian Revolution and seizing of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran were related events directed at removing foreign influence from Iran.<sup>35</sup> The Iranian clergy viewed modernization by the Shah as toxic Western imperialism, and therefore an infringement on Iranian society. The clergy believed it was their Islamic duty to unseat the source of these unholy policies.<sup>36</sup> In December 1978, anti-Shah activists inspired by the Iranian clergy took to the streets in mass demonstrations. A popular revolution followed that forced the Shah from Iran and the government to collapse. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini remained Iran's most revered cleric and out-spoken critic of the Shah's government, even after the Shah forced him into exile fourteen years earlier in 1964. The revolution allowed Khomeini to return to Iran, and within a year, Khomeini

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<sup>33</sup>Terry Beckenbaugh, Professor of Military History at the Command and General Staff College, interview by author, Independence, MO, 22 March 2011.

<sup>34</sup>Mark J. Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, eds., "Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran," The National Security Archive, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB126/index.htm> (accessed 1 April 2011).

<sup>35</sup>Robin Wright, *Dreams and Shadows* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 323.

<sup>36</sup>Beckenbaugh, interview by author. The Shah was notorious for political imprisonments. However, the clergy in Iran remained less accountable for their activities in mosques, which became a place to voice dissent and organize actions directed against the Shah.

instituted political rule by Islamic jurists, where he, the Supreme Leader, held divine authority over all aspects of government and society.<sup>37</sup>

The Iranian Revolution took the U.S. intelligence community by surprise as the CIA had poorly assessed the clerical influence in Iran.<sup>38</sup> It was the first occurrence of radical, political Islam in modern times. The U.S. diplomatic corps remained in Iran after the revolution, trusting Iran's provisional government with their protection. The American Embassy became a lucrative target for Iranian hatred of the United States, especially after President Carter's acceptance of the ailing Shah into the United States for medical treatment. This action incited Iran as it suggested another attempt to return the Shah to power. In an almost immediate response, radical pro-Khomeini students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November, 1979, taking fifty-two diplomats hostage for 444 days.<sup>39</sup> Overnight, Iran's favored status with the United States was forever changed.<sup>40</sup>

Khomeini's theocracy was not favored by the Islamic clergy or the citizens of Iran, but the hostage crisis quickly solidified Khomeini's support base and within one month the system of Islamic rule passed by a national referendum.<sup>41</sup> In his new role as

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<sup>37</sup>This form of government is defined as a theocracy, or rule by God.

<sup>38</sup>Abbas Milani, "Obama and Iran," Stanford: Classes Without Quizzes, 9 September 2009, <http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/obama-and-iran/id385577095?i=85423192> (accessed 1 May 2011), 10:00.

<sup>39</sup>Wright, "The Challenge of Iran," 5.

<sup>40</sup>Wright, *Dreams and Shadows*, 306.

<sup>41</sup>Gary Sick, "The Carter Administration," in *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010),

Supreme Leader, Khomeini vetoed all early initiatives by both the United States and the United Nations to free the hostages. Khomeini preached a worldview that Iran's Islamic system embodied all the good in the world and must expand, while the United States and its European allies perpetuated everything evil in the world and should be resisted.<sup>42</sup> In the U.S. media, Khomeini was portrayed as a turbaned mad-man, a "lunatic," and was disparaged in late-night comedy as a form of American retaliation.<sup>43</sup> The Carter Administration appeared powerless in the face of this new adversary. In response to unsuccessful negotiations and growing dissatisfaction at home, President Carter authorized a military rescue mission. The mission failed due to errors in planning and equipment malfunctions, resulting in the deaths of eight U.S. servicemembers and further complicated negotiations with Khomeini's Islamic Regime.<sup>44</sup>

Following Ronald Reagan's presidential election victory in 1980, Iran reached a settlement with the United States through Algerian brokered mediation. Resolving the problems with Iran proved incredibly difficult, but compromise was achieved and the hostages were released.<sup>45</sup> In the end, the Algiers Accords were financially debilitating as

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130; Wright, *Dreams and Shadows*, 289. Highly revered Ayatollah Montazeri symbolized the large clerical opposition to "Khomeini-ism."

<sup>42</sup>Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia?*, 4.

<sup>43</sup>Shia TV, "Mike Wallace interviews Ayatollah Ruhollah Imam Khomeini," [http://www.shiatv.net/view\\_video.php?viewkey=5e28defb88a3289cd7ee](http://www.shiatv.net/view_video.php?viewkey=5e28defb88a3289cd7ee) (accessed 23 March 2011). 60 Minutes correspondent Mike Wallace referred to Khomeini as "a lunatic," referencing comments made by Egyptian President Sadat, during an interview with Ayatollah Khomeini during the American hostage crisis.

<sup>44</sup>Sick, "The Carter Administration," 131.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

Iran never recovered around 8 billion of their frozen assets.<sup>46</sup> The assault on the U.S. Embassy ended the official U.S. relationship with Iran, destroyed Iran's international legitimacy, and serves as a seminal event in shaping America's understanding of political Islam.<sup>47</sup>

### Iran-Iraq War (1980 to 1988)

The Iran-Iraq War perpetuated Iran's feelings of encroachment by the United States. Iraq initiated the war as a response to border disputes, unwanted Iranian influence in Iraq, and belief that post-revolution Iran was vulnerable. Both Iran and Iraq viewed the War as an opportunity to gain geopolitical standing. Iran's incursion into Iraq in 1982, along with its rhetoric to besiege Jerusalem, encouraged President Reagan's support to Iraq in the War.<sup>48</sup> The United States effectively led a large coalition to block arms supplies to Iran, provided intelligence support to Iraq, and protected Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil shipments in the Persian Gulf. Iraq employed chemical weapons against Iran, an atrocity that was met with indifference by President Reagan, though 50,000 Iranians were

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 132. Iran paid close to \$8 billion in reparations for taking 52 American diplomats hostage.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Geoffrey Kemp, "The Reagan Administration," in *The Iran Primer Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 134.

terrorized by chemical affects.<sup>49</sup> Popular loathing of the United States reached a peak in Iran by the middle of the War.<sup>50</sup>

In retaliation, Iran waged a proxy war against the United States in Lebanon. Iranian backed Hezbollah attacked vulnerable U.S. positions in Beirut as the U.S. mediated the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 1983. Hezbollah bombings killed seventeen service members at the U.S. Embassy and 241 Marines at their barracks. Hezbollah also orchestrated many kidnappings of Americans in Lebanon and elsewhere. U.S. attempts to free hostages in Lebanon through Iranian government involvement in a secret arms-for-hostage swap failed, thereby destroying the credibility of moderate forces in the Iranian Regime and strengthening the conservative religious leadership.<sup>51</sup>

By 1988, U.S. efforts to protect oil shipments in the Persian Gulf resulted in direct military engagements between Iran and the United States. The U.S. Navy destroyed one-quarter of the Iranian Navy's large vessels in a one-day skirmish, code named "Operation Praying Mantis." The United States also accidentally shot down a commercial airline flight from Iran, further contributing to Iran's vehement hatred towards the United States.<sup>52</sup> When the war ended in 1988, Iraq emerged from the war stronger, while Iran blamed the United States and Europe for tipping power in favor of their Arab ally, Iraq.

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<sup>49</sup>Wright, *Dreams and Shadows*, 325.

<sup>50</sup>Abbas Milani, "Nukes, Kooks, and Democracy in Iran," Stanford: Classes Without Quizzes, 12 November 2007, <http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/nukes-kooks-democracy-in-iran/id385577095?i=85423188> (accessed 1 May 2011), 25:00.

<sup>51</sup>Kemp, "The Reagan Administration," 134.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

## Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq

Efforts taken during by the Clinton Administration (1993 to 2000) for rapprochement with Iran improved relations; however, Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, refused any official dialogue during this period.<sup>53</sup> Following the World Trade Center bombings on September 11, 2001, Iran's President Mohammad Khatami immediately condemned the terrorist acts, and Iran participated in a dialogue with the United States on Afghanistan and Iraq. These engagements were the first official talks between Iran and the United States since the 1979 Revolution.<sup>54</sup> Iran's cooperation was self-serving as the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's ruling Baath Party were Iranian adversaries.

Iran-U.S. talks abruptly ceased in May, 2003, when a terrorist attack in Riyadh killed nine Americans. Though this attack was not linked to Iran, it rekindled memories of the devastating 1996 Iranian backed bombing of the Khobar Towers Housing Complex in Saudi Arabia.<sup>55</sup> Iranian and U.S. diplomats re-engaged in 2004 during a series of

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<sup>53</sup>Bruce O. Riedel, "The Clinton Administration," in *The Iran Primer Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 141. The Clinton Administration's offer for unconditional engagement with Iran and apologies for the CIA role in the 1953 coup were balked at by Ayatollah Khamenei.

<sup>54</sup>Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," 49-51. President Bush's January 2002 State of the Union address likened Iran to North Korea and Iraq as part of an "axis of evil." President Bush's strong message persuaded Iran to enter in a dialogue with the United States. The Bush Administration's diplomacy towards Iran failed to improve relations due to pre-conditions on Iran's nuclear program.

<sup>55</sup>Riedel, 140-141. In 2001, the U.S. Justice Department issued an indictment that detailed Iran's Revolutionary Guard and Lebanese Hezbollah involvement in the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, which killed 19 Americans and wounded 340 others. Iran's government has denied this allegation.

meetings in Baghdad to discuss the reconstruction of post-Sadaam Iraq.<sup>56</sup> These early efforts for unity in Iraq's reconstruction quickly fell apart. Iran's influence in Afghanistan and Iraq both disrupted U.S. strategy and impeded progress. Iran's Qods Force trained, armed, and directed Iraq's three largest militias whose activities destabilized Iraq through 2009.<sup>57</sup> Senior Qods leaders were even detained near the Kurdish town of Irbil in 2007.<sup>58</sup> Today, Iran's influence in Iraq's government and within Iraq's economy is greater than ever before. It is commonly expressed by Iraqis that their security and political misfortunes are caused by Iran.<sup>59</sup> Explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) provided by Iran are the most sophisticated and deadly weapon used against Iraqi and Coalition forces. Radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist political movement and Mehdi army, still opposes U.S. presence in Iraq with support from the Iranian Regime.<sup>60</sup>

In Afghanistan, Iran's assistance to the Taliban has superseded any other efforts to stabilize the nascent government under President Hamid Karzai. U.S. intelligence reports that Iran has trained and armed Taliban militants and provided large sums of

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<sup>56</sup>Stephen J. Hadley, "The George W. Bush Administration," in *The Iran Primer Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 143.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 143; Wright, *Dreams and Shadows*, 334.

<sup>58</sup>Wright, *Dreams and Shadows*, 337.

<sup>59</sup>Discussions between author and members of the 34th Iraqi Armor Brigade near Baghdad, Iraq, 2009.

<sup>60</sup>Jomana Karadsheh and Joe Sterling, "In Iraq, a popular cleric cranks up anti-U.S. rhetoric," *CNN World*, 8 January 2011, [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-08/world/iraq.sadr\\_1\\_al-sadr-mehdi-army-iraqi-flags?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-08/world/iraq.sadr_1_al-sadr-mehdi-army-iraqi-flags?_s=PM:WORLD) (accessed 5 April 2011).



money to influence both the government and the insurgency.<sup>61</sup> There are reports today that the Revolutionary Guard is paying bonuses to the Taliban for each U.S. death and destroyed equipment.<sup>62</sup> Iran has been opportunistic in Afghanistan, aligning goals with the Taliban to wage another proxy war against the United States.

Further complicating relations between Iran and the United States is Iran's insistence to advance nuclear energy technology, and potentially a covert weapons program. The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate described Iran's covert nuclear weapons program as suspended.<sup>63</sup> This assessment temporarily relieved international pressure on Iran, and consequently emboldened the Iranian Regime. The 2010 National Intelligence Estimate stated that "Iran is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons" and is becoming a virtual nuclear state with the acquired knowledge from its enrichment activities.<sup>64</sup> This assessment has re-focused concern by the international community on Iran's nuclear activities and has resulted in more debilitating economic sanctions on Iran. Israel, Gulf States, and some American officials have all proposed military options to counter the threat of nuclear proliferation by Iran.

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<sup>61</sup>Hadley, "The George W. Bush Administration," 143.

<sup>62</sup>Thomas Joscelyn, "Iran Pays Bounties to Taliban for Dead Americans," *The Weekly Standard*, 6 September 2010, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/blogs/iran-pays-bounties-taliban-dead-americans> (accessed 1 April 2011).

<sup>63</sup>National Intelligence Estimate, "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," November 2007, [http://www.dni.gov/press\\_releases/20071203\\_release.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf) (accessed 1 April 2011), 6.

<sup>64</sup>Dennis C. Blair, "Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," 2 February 2010, [http://www.dni.gov/testimonies/20100202\\_testimony.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/testimonies/20100202_testimony.pdf) (accessed 1 April 2011), 13.

## U.S. Policy with Iran

Upon taking office, President Obama approached Iran in much the same way as President George W. Bush, using a strategy of persuasion or carrots and sticks.<sup>65</sup> Punitive UN Security Council Resolutions and increasingly harsh sanctions are the core tactics of the persuasion policy. The Obama Administration is hopeful that, over-time, persuasion will end Iran's illicit nuclear program and establish favorable conditions for full-engagement. The American Administration's peaceful approach is acceptable to both domestic and international communities as long as Iran's nuclear weapons capability remains distant. By pursuing diplomatic policies with Iran, the Obama Administration assumes that Iran can be deterred, or, in the worst-case that Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, Iran will not use it or arm a terrorist organization. Assessing the outcome of the persuasion policy is difficult because any assessment is subjective and hindered by the on-going break in relations. The volatile status of the Iran-U.S. relations is therefore a risk to the entire Middle East.<sup>66</sup>

The Brookings Institute, an American foreign policy think tank, recommends an integrated Iran policy that assimilates several of the nine options listed in figure 1. To minimize the risk from Iran's unpredictable behavior, the Obama Administration should develop contingencies and fallback options.<sup>67</sup> International factors weigh heavily in any U.S. policy decisions. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Gulf States are most

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<sup>65</sup>Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia?*, 3.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 17, 33.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 201-202.

concerned with Iran's nuclear ambitions.<sup>68</sup> Europe, China, and Russia are also critical of Iran's nuclear program; however, they are unevenly committed to pressure Iran.<sup>69</sup> Russia and China supported the most recent round of UN sanctions in 2010, then undermined these sanctions by pursuing economic and energy interests in Iran. Iran's ability to align with the East is offsetting international pressure and is the greatest set-back to the Obama Administration's current policy.

Iran has withstood increasing international pressure to its nuclear program with determination and arrogance. A weakened economy has not coerced Iran to compromise on its nuclear ambitions or other controversial policies. Time is now a consideration for the United States as it evaluates the acceptability of the current policy over other, more confrontational and expedient options (see figure 1). President Obama has acknowledged that military options are available in the case that the Iranian threat reaches a tipping point. Yet, without a substantial provocation, U.S. military strikes or a U.S. military invasion are unlikely.<sup>70</sup> The Congressional Research Service report on Iran cautions Congress that any military option could provoke retaliatory actions, such as Iran's ability to upset the world's oil market, withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 20, 76.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>70</sup>Council on Foreign Relations, "Secretary of Defense Gates' Speech at West Point," 28 April 2008, <http://www.cfr.org/defensehomeland-security/secretary-defense-gates-speech-west-point/p16086> (accessed 13 May 2011). The use of military force remains an option to the U.S. President; however, Secretary of Defense Gates has reiterated the Administration's intent to deal with Iran's behavior peacefully.

further destabilize Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel through terrorist activities or ballistic missile attacks.<sup>71</sup>

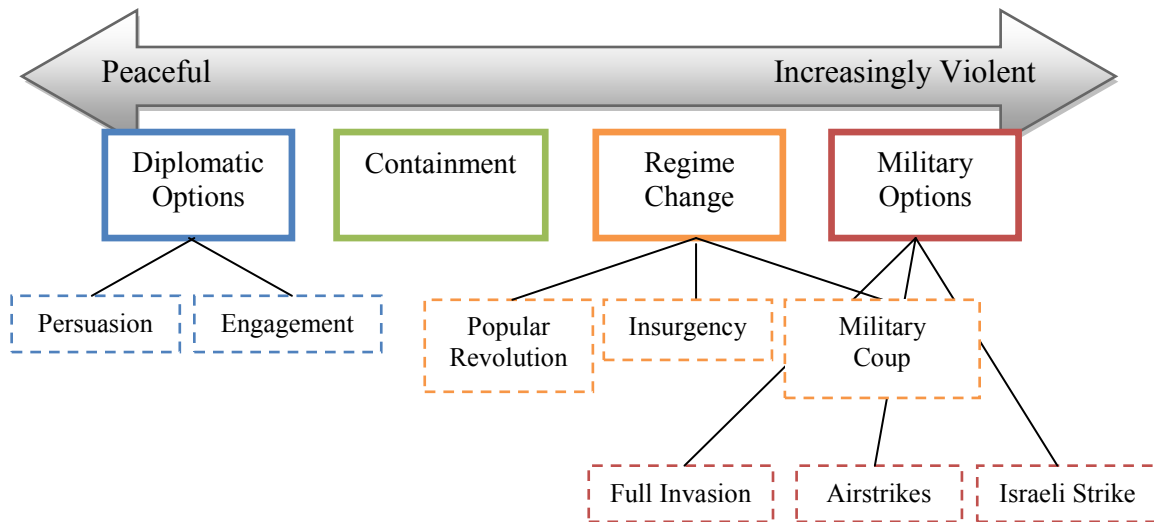


Figure 1. Policy Options with Iran

Source: Created by author using data from Kenneth M. Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia? Options for a New American Strategy Toward Iran* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2009), 9.

### Official Dialogue

The Paris Accords signed by Iran in November 2004 remains Iran's last authentic international diplomatic effort. Following a meeting with Britain, France, and Germany, Iran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment and allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) full-access to its nuclear facilities.<sup>72</sup> Upon entering office in 2005, President Ahmadinejad quickly withdrew from this agreement as a way to reassert Iran's

<sup>71</sup>Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," 49-55.

<sup>72</sup>Hadley, "The George W. Bush Administration," 143.

standing in the Middle East. The Supreme Leader has not publicly refuted Ahmadinejad's hard-line approach towards the West, and he has expressed his own suspicion over President Obama's motives for engaging with Iran.<sup>73</sup>

Other forms of communication between Iran and the United States have recently occurred, primarily through written letters and speeches. President Obama's two letters to the Supreme Leader and three consecutive Persian New Year (Nowruz) greetings (2009 to 2011) reiterate the Obama Administration's desire for dialogue. In return, President Ahmadinejad has sent mixed messages regarding Iran's desire for official contact. He recently fired his Foreign Minister out of concerns for loyalty to his agenda. Iran's new foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, is perceived to be a talented diplomat but will have minor input into Iran's strategic decisions.<sup>74</sup> In January 2011, Iran participated in official negotiations with member nations to the UN Security Council. Reports from the negotiations suggest that Iran remains unwilling to improve relations with the international community through concessions on its nuclear program.<sup>75</sup>

Henri Barkey, an expert on foreign relations and peace at Lehigh University, summarized recent negotiations as doomed from the start. He stated, "Both sides are

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<sup>73</sup>Semira N. Nikou, "Timeline of Iran's Foreign Relations," in *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 237.

<sup>74</sup>BBC News—Middle East, "Iran foreign policy 'unchanged' by Mottaki sacking," 14 December 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11990619> (accessed 1 April 2011).

<sup>75</sup>Praveen Swami, "Iran nuclear talks break down sparking fears of showdown over regime's pursuit of atomic weapons," *The Telegraph*, 22 January 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/8275969/Iran-nuclear-talks-break-down-sparking-fears-of-showdown-over-regimes-pursuit-of-atomic-weapons.html> (accessed 1 April 2011).

playing a game in which the object is to pretend to the audience (the rest of the world) that they mean well.”<sup>76</sup> Negotiations serve Iran by allowing them more time for nuclear development. For the international community, Iran’s obstinance justifies the increase in punitive measures, short of war. A string of covert actions in 2010 to degrade Iran’s nuclear enrichment capability has further complicated engagement by increasing suspicions from both sides.<sup>77</sup> Expert negotiator and former Congressman, Lee Hamilton (D-IN), suggests that U.S. diplomats must establish a sustainable, patient approach towards Iran that exudes authenticity, respect, and a willingness to discuss the full-range of grievances.<sup>78</sup> Faith-based diplomacy and other unofficial diplomatic efforts, according to Hamilton, have important roles in reinvigorating official relations.

### Summary

Several important historical events underpin the strained relationship between Iran and the United States. Iran’s perception of the United States intruding in Iran’s internal affairs began shortly after World War II, and since the 1979 hostage crisis, there has been little diplomatic contact or dialogue between the governments. Both

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<sup>76</sup>Henri J. Barkley, “What’s Turkey’s Role in the Second Round of Iran Talks?,” U.S. Institute of Peace, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/jan/10/whats-turkeys-role-second-round-iran-talks> (accessed 1 April 2011).

<sup>77</sup>Christopher Dickey et al., “The Shadow War,” *Newsweek*, 13 December 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/12/13/the-covert-war-against-iran-s-nuclear-program.html> (accessed 1 April 2011). President Ahmadinejad blamed Israel and Western governments for a series of nuclear scientist assassinations and cyber attacks on Iran’s uranium enrichment capability. abcNews reported in 2007 of a covert CIA program to destabilize the Iranian Regime.

<sup>78</sup>Lee Hamilton, former Congressman from Indiana, telephone interview by author, 4 March 2011. Mr. Hamilton was a negotiator with the Soviet Union during the Reagan Administration.

governments have admitted a failure to understand the complexities of the security interests that prevent rapprochement.<sup>79</sup> Attempts to reconcile differences in 2011 have, unfortunately, increased estrangement and hostility, rather than developing the understanding that can help rapprochement efforts.

The absence of a diplomatic relationship with Iran remains a leading challenge to U.S. security interests in the Middle East. At the center of Iran's Islamic Republic are elites who ascended during the 1979 Revolution or in the wake of the Iran-Iraq War. They have a deep connection with Khomeini's form of clerical rule, lingering suspicions of the West, and animosity towards the United States for its domineering presence in the Middle East. The Iranian Regime today views peacemaking with the United States as a sign of weakness and a threat to its survival.

The majority of Iran's population, those under 35, view the West favorably and do not maintain historical grudges. The younger generation is rather astute and suspicious of their government's propaganda against the "Great Satan."<sup>80</sup> The youth supported Green Movement and other opposition forces have the potential to force the Regime into more accommodating policies both domestically and internationally. At the height of opposition group activism following Iran's 2009 presidential election, the Regime responded by condoning a brutal crack-down on the protestors.

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<sup>79</sup>Dennis Ross, "The Challenge of Iran," U.S. Institute of Peace, 1 December 2010, [http://www.usip.org/files/Dennis\\_Ross\\_Remarks%20.pdf](http://www.usip.org/files/Dennis_Ross_Remarks%20.pdf) (accessed 1 April 2010). Ambassador Ross explained that the absence of contact with Iran causes mutual distrust and suspicion.

<sup>80</sup>Iranian graduate student, telephone interview by author, 1 April 2011. The "Great Satan" was coined by Ayatollah Khomeini to describe the United States. The Iranian Regime refers to Israel as the "Little Satan."

The Arab uprisings throughout the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 have used similar tactics as the Green Movement in 2009, albeit with more success. Another pinnacle event in Iran, such as a natural disaster or another major political fiasco, could reignite opposition groups in Iran with new confidence and resolve. The Obama Administration's policy to engage and improve relations with Iran is supported by assessments that Iran's nuclear program is slow and under-resourced, while closely watched by the world's best intelligence services.<sup>81</sup> President Obama's diplomatic invitation and Iran's internal pressures for reform have created favorable conditions for purposeful dialogue. In the next chapter, Iran's system of government is described to identify the individuals and groups that influence Iran's foreign policy. Engaging those with the power to influence Iran's policies is essential for meaningful diplomacy.

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<sup>81</sup>David Albright, Andrea Sticker, and Shahram Chubin, "Iran's Nuclear Program," in *The Iran Primer Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 81, 85.



## CHAPTER 3

### ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN IRAN

This chapter evaluates the Islamic Republic's governing system to determine what individuals and institutions are capable of influencing Iran's foreign policy. First, it describes the "quietist" or reclusive tradition of Islamic religious leaders in order to better understand the divergent, radical nature of Iran's Islamic system. The transformation of Islamic leaders to activism is a recent change, taking place over the past one-hundred years. Many of the world's most revered Shi'a religious clerics, including Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran, maintain the tradition of quietist behavior. In contrast, analysis reveals that Iran's constitutionally empowered clergy represent the world's most politicized form of Islam. A supreme cleric presides over the government and military, and the top tiers of government are filled by Iran's state clergy. Given the brutality of Iran's internal security forces and elaborate intelligence services, preservation of the Islamic system seems likely for the foreseeable future. Therefore, changing Iran's foreign and domestic policies will require socializing the clerical establishment in new, cooperative mind-sets.

#### State and Religion

In 2011, Islamic religious leaders and organizations continue to secure increasing shares in the political leadership of Muslim nations.<sup>82</sup> In the historical tradition of Islam, however, religious specialists, or *ulama*, served only to guide the religious affairs of their

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<sup>82</sup>Government instability in Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Sudan, Yemen, Libya have created greater opportunities for both democratic and Islamist movements in North Africa and the Middle East.

followers, not to lead the nation politically.<sup>83</sup> This “quietist” or reclusive tradition allowed the *ulama* to remain above the politics of the state and maintain a revered and mystical aura.<sup>84</sup> Religious leader activism is a recent development in the Muslim world, with the 1967 Israeli-Arab Six Day War generally accepted as a seminal event.<sup>85</sup> Today, Islam’s influence in predominately Muslim nations registers along a broad spectrum. Turkey is secular, whereas the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan and Pakistan are semi-secular, and the Islamic Republic of Iran is considered “non-secular” (see figure 2).<sup>86</sup> Nations on the secular end follow “progressive” Islam, described as tolerant, pluralistic, and responsible to the ways of the modern world.<sup>87</sup> Secular nations also benefit from economies that better integrate into world markets.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>L. Carl Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 54-55. The *ulama* are similar to Jewish rabbis and Christian clergy in religious authority.

<sup>84</sup>Trita Parsi, President of the National Iranian American Council, telephone interview by author, 4 January 2011.

<sup>85</sup>Brown, *Religion and State*, 123; John Esposito, *Unholy War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 126.

<sup>86</sup>Descriptions of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey are based on the importance of Islamic (*shar'ia*) law in the legal system. Secular governments are defined as having complete separation of state and religion.

<sup>87</sup>Esposito, *Unholy War*, 139.

<sup>88</sup>World databank, “World Development Indicators and Global Development Finance,” <http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do> (accessed 30 January 2011). Iran’s GDP per capita exceeded Turkey’s before the 1979 Islamic Revolution (1975: \$1474 (Iran) vs. \$1083 (Turkey) in US dollars). Since the Revolution, Iran’s GDP per capita has been doubled by Turkey’s (2009: \$4540 (Iran) vs. \$8215 (Turkey)).

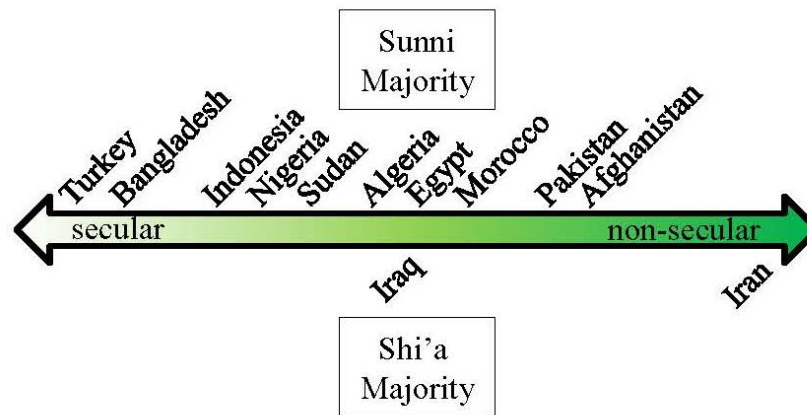


Figure 2. Religion and State for the Twelve Largest Muslim Countries  
 Source: Created by author.<sup>89</sup>

### Traditional Roles

Islamic tradition encouraged political submission and the separation of government from the community of Muslims.<sup>90</sup> Muslims obeyed the edicts of government and in return, government supported Islam. The *ulama* considered political quietism essential to guide others in following God's law. Islamic culture did recognize a need for government and administration of the state, but considered the type of government irrelevant for a Muslim to live according to God's laws.<sup>91</sup> In rare circumstances, the *ulama* influenced politicians through indirect methods such as religious hadiths (*fatwas*) and sermons; however, the lack of formal powers limited the

<sup>89</sup>Wikipedia, "List of Muslim Nations," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Muslim\\_majority\\_countries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Muslim_majority_countries) (accessed 29 January, 2011); Wikipedia, "Sharia," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharia> (accessed 29 January 2011).

<sup>90</sup>Brown, *Religion and State*, 54; Shireen T. Hunter, *The Future of Islam and the West* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 52, 58.

<sup>91</sup>Brown, *Religion and State*, 54.

*ulama*'s ability to force government into action. This informality also served to protect the *ulama* from authoritarian government backlash. History suggests cooperation generally prevailed between *ulama* and governments in order to protect the interests of both Islam and the state.<sup>92</sup>

The emergence of a religious hierarchy in the Shi'a sect of Islam during the eighteenth century established religious organization, the foundation for future political activism in Iran.<sup>93</sup> Shi'a Islam instituted a belief to follow a single *mujtahid*, a specially learned cleric responsible to guide the faithful in the conduct of their lives. The title "ayatollah," which means sign of God, first appeared in early nineteenth century Iran to distinguish the most learned clerics. Due to clerical distinctions, a hierarchy emerged that resembles the Catholic Church. A Muslim "pope" almost emerged in the nineteenth century; however, the informal ascendancy to ayatollah prevented a consensus as to which ayatollah was preeminent.<sup>94</sup> Today, there are approximately 40 ayatollahs living in Iraq and Iran, the center of Shi'a Islam.<sup>95</sup> The majority of the world's Muslims, however, follow the Sunni Islamic teachings which reject clerical hierarchy.

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>94</sup>Mehdi Khalaji, "The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2006, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus59final.pdf> (accessed 1 May 2011), 3.

<sup>95</sup>Wikipedia, "List of Ayatollahs," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Ayatollahs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Ayatollahs) (accessed 29 January 2011).

## Quietism to Activism

A major ideological shift in Muslim political thought occurred throughout the twentieth century. Both Sunni and Shi'a leaders underwent politicization to protect Islamic interests from the threatening influences of European colonial rule and today's Western influence through globalization. Religious leaders increasingly encouraged dissent of government, especially where the quality of life remained dismal. Advancements in urbanization, education, and literacy allowed the average citizen to become more political, religious, and informed of the dysfunction in post-colonial governments.<sup>96</sup> In the wake of general discontent, Muslim fundamentalists gained large followings based on charisma and religious credibility.

Four of Islam's most charismatic leaders emerged during the twentieth century. In Sunni Islam, Abu al-A'la Maududi provided the spiritual direction to unify Muslims within the predominately Hindu India.<sup>97</sup> In 1947, Pakistan emerged from India's western border as an independent Islamic nation inspired by Maududi's Islamist themes. In 1928, Hassan al-Banna organized the Muslim Brotherhood as an opposition group to the Egyptian government. Banna's fundamentalist movement sought to institute Islamic Law over all modes of government and society throughout the Muslim world, using violence when necessary.<sup>98</sup> Following Banna's assassination in 1949, Sayyid Qutb emerged as a premier Islamist within the Muslim Brotherhood. Bannas and Qutb's achievements in

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<sup>96</sup>Brown, *Religion and State*, 125-126. As an example, Iran's urbanization increased by 20 percent between 1950 and 1970. Primary and secondary school attendance increased by 30 percent between 1960 and 1980.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 146.

organization and radical ideology have inspired many other Islamist movements, including al-Qaeda.<sup>99</sup>

In the center of Shi'a Islam, Ayatollah Khomeini inspired Iran's 1979 popular revolution. Khomeini, like Banna and Qutb, visualized rebuilding Mohammed's Golden Age caliphate where God's law controls politics and the community.<sup>100</sup> From exile in France, Khomeini publicly supported democracy in Iran.<sup>101</sup> Upon his return to Iran, however, Khomeini instituted a despotic theocracy with absolute authority reserved for Iran's most venerated religious leader, the Supreme Leader. The American hostage crisis (1979) and the Iran-Iraq War (1980 to 1988) stabilized the rule of the Islamic clergy and emboldened the Islamic Republic's suppression of opposition groups.<sup>102</sup> "Khomeini-ism" represents the largest break from Islamic tradition in the world. Many of Iran's ayatollahs rejected *valayat-e-faqih*, or Khomeini's system of "rule of the jurisprudent."<sup>103</sup> Yet, after 30 years of tyranny, the Islamic Republic of Iran remains virtually unchanged. Khomeini's system remains the most dramatic example of politicized Islam in the Muslim world.

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 164.

<sup>101</sup>Milani, "Nukes, Kooks, and Democracy in Iran," 16:45.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 22:10.

<sup>103</sup>Mehdi Khalaji, "Politics and the Clergy," in *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 28.

### Iran's Constitutional Powers

Iran's 1979 constitution combines Islamic and democratic institutions into a multi-layered, redundant system of government. Approximately three quarters of Iran's constitutional powers reside with un-elected Islamic clergy (see Figure 3). Ayatollah Khamenei, Khomeini's successor and the current Supreme Leader, is the head of state and exerts both political and divine authority over all aspects of Iran's government and society.<sup>104</sup> The Supreme Leader theoretically serves as an infallible arbiter between Iran's many power centers and ensures survival of the Islamic Republic through control of Iran's Armed Forces and key government appointments. The Guardian Council, Expediency Council, Head of Judiciary, Armed Forces Commanders, National Broadcasting Director, and Friday Prayer Leaders represent most of the Supreme Leader's appointment authority.

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<sup>104</sup>David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010), 24.

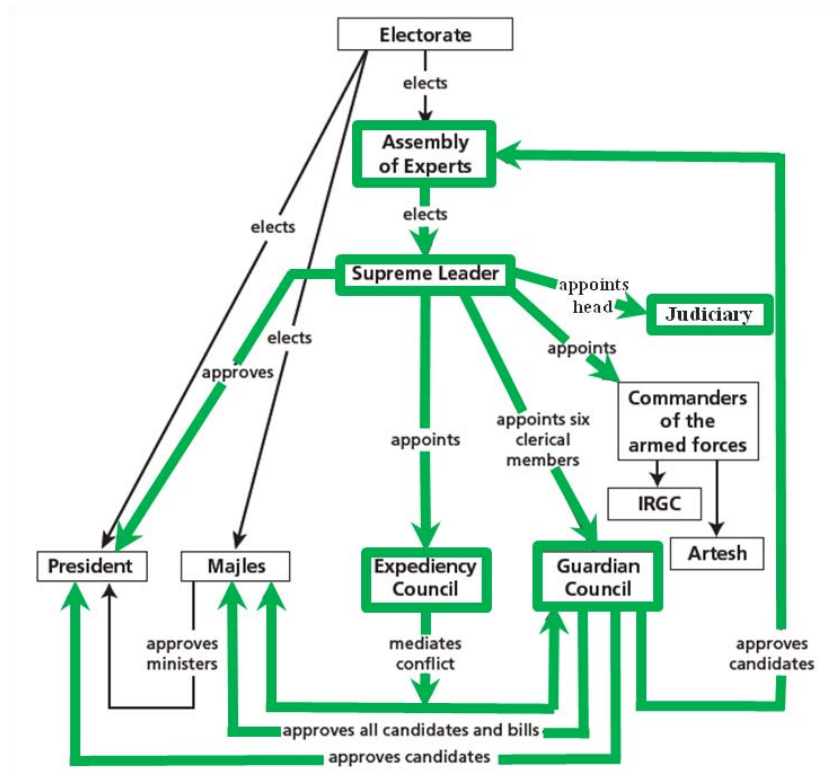


Figure 3. Distribution of Constitutional Powers in the Islamic Republic  
 Source: Modified from David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010), 23.  
 \*Bold boxes and lines indicate powers and institutions controlled by Iran's clergy.

### Democratic and Islamic Institutions

The Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council exert control over Iran's two democratic institutions, the President and the Parliament (Majles). The Supreme Leader and Guardian Council approve all candidates for these offices; therefore, elections are largely a consulted vote over candidates aligned to the conservative factions within the Islamic Republic.<sup>105</sup> The roles of the President and the Majles are similar to Western democracies, including the President's authority to appoint and remove cabinet ministers

<sup>105</sup>Milani, "Nukes, Kooks, and Democracy in Iran," 19:20.



and represent the nation in foreign affairs. The 290 member Majles has authority to review and approve legislation; however, in practice the Majles focuses only on domestic issues and essentially acquiesces to the desires of the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader.

In addition to influencing the Majles composition, the Guardian Council functions like an upper house in the Parliament. The Guardian Council approves all legislative actions. To settle the regular disputes between the Majles and the Guardian Council, Khomeini amended the constitution in 1988 to establish the Expediency Council.<sup>106</sup> The Expediency Council is similar in function to the Guardian Council, but with increased oversight of all branches of government. It consists of non-permanent representatives from disparate government institutions to enhance its credibility; however, most of the permanent members are clerics loyal to the Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader uses the Expediency Council as his study group and to sway government in his favor.<sup>107</sup>

The powers within Iran's governing institutions greatly overlap, creating a convoluted bureaucracy prone to deadlock. The extensive system of checks and balances is meant to enhance the Supreme Leader's power to arbitrate over important issues. Distributed power also protects the Islamic Republic from change and marginalizes the elected bodies. Iran's constitution gives the impression of a powerful electorate; however, popular vote does not exist.<sup>108</sup> The President, who ranks second to the Supreme Leader in constitutional authority, has historically been a figurehead for the Islamic clergy.

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<sup>106</sup>Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, 30.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid.

<sup>108</sup>Milani, "Nukes, Kooks, and Democracy in Iran," 21:45.

However, President Ahmadinejad (2005 to present) displays an increased level of independence, especially in his articulation of Iran's foreign policies. He is the first President to hold no religious credentials and to acquire more power in his second term, partly due to his shared support base with the Supreme Leader. A newly appointed foreign minister in December 2010 with close ties to the Supreme Leader suggests actions by the Regime to stifle Ahmadinejad's independence.

Of all the government institutions, the Assembly of Experts is capable of changing the nature of the Islamic Republic. The Assembly of Experts is a body of eighty-three clerics with constitutional authority to appoint, remove, and admonish the Supreme Leader.<sup>109</sup> Yet over 30 years, the Assembly of Experts has never appointed or removed a Supreme Leader and remains secretive in its activities. Khomeini circumvented the Assembly of Experts in 1989 by hand-picking his successor, Khamenei, over the more revered and popular Grand Ayatollah Montazeri. Following the disputed 2009 presidential election, the Assembly of Experts expressed a growing level of dissatisfaction with the Supreme Leader.<sup>110</sup>

The Assembly of Experts could soon have the opportunity to influence the future of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei's increasing age and declining health make his ability to rule tenuous. Leading candidates for Supreme Leader include Khamenei's second son,

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<sup>109</sup>Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, 28.

<sup>110</sup>Parsi, telephone interview by author. Following the 2009 election, Ayatollah Rafsanjani, then Head of the Assembly of Experts, conducted an informal poll; over forty percent of the Assembly of Experts voted to remove Ayatollah Khamenei from his role as the Supreme Leader.

Mojtaba, Ayatollah Hashemi-Sharoudi, and Hojatoleslam Hassan Khomeini.<sup>111</sup>

Hojatoleslam Khomeini is the grandson of the 1979 Revolution's supreme ayatollah. He is a critic of the current Regime, and is a reformist who seeks secularism and Iran's inclusion into the international community.<sup>112</sup> Mojtaba Khamenei and Ayatollah Hashemi-Sharoudi are traditional conservatives committed to the survival of the Islamic Republic in its current form.<sup>113</sup>

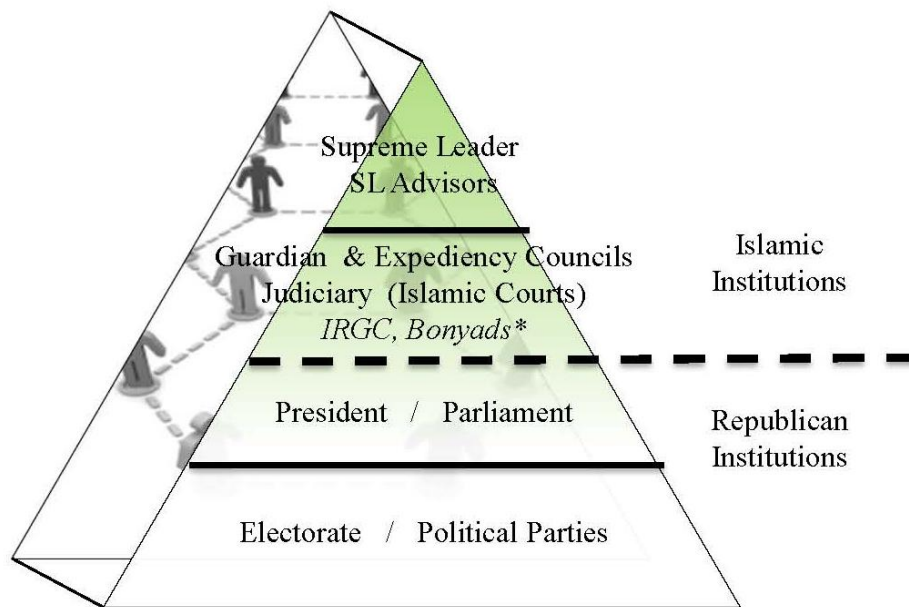


Figure 4. Networks and the Multi-tiered Structure of the Islamic Republic  
Source: Created by author. Key: \*Non-government institutions with great influence in Iran's political arena.

<sup>111</sup>Mehrzaad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani, "Iran's Political Elite," in *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 221-226.

<sup>112</sup>Faoud Ajami, *The Foreigner's Gift* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 105-106.

<sup>113</sup>Mehrzaad Boroujerdi, Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University, e-mail received by author, 19 January 2011.

### Informal Authority in Iran's Government

The Islamic Republic's system of competing government institutions has sparked informal networks of elites and institutions to compete within the government's framework for influence with the Supreme Leader.<sup>114</sup> Informal networks act by creating bridges and tunnels between the government institutions. The most influential networks within Iran are the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's charitable foundations (*bonyads*), the clergy, and the affiliations of elites within political factions (see Appendix B).<sup>115</sup> The IRGC recently emerged as Iran's most influential network, surpassing both *bonyads* and the clergy.<sup>116</sup>

#### The Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

The IRGC is Iran's primary internal security force responsible for preserving the Supreme Leader's control over the Islamic Republic. Since its inception in 1979, the IRGC has evolved into a state-like institution with influence in Iran's economy and politics.<sup>117</sup> The IRGC operates many of Iran's domestic and foreign businesses, controls Iran's strategic weapons, gas and oil industry, nuclear facilities, and has been the stepping

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<sup>114</sup>Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, 39-40.

<sup>115</sup>*Ibid.*, 52, 67-73. Iranian elites (*khodi*) network themselves within the four political factions. All factions are supportive of the Islamic system of *valayat-e-faqih*, yet they disagree on how to reform the Islamic Republic for modern times.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, 54. In the 1980s, the clergy, and in the 1990s, the *bonyads*, were considered Iran's most influential networks.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 60-61.

stone for many into senior government positions.<sup>118</sup> Through its Qods Force, the IRGC has also influenced regional politics in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.<sup>119</sup> In the past decade, the Qods has provided training and support to Shi'a militias in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Hamas and Palestinian Jihad in Israel.<sup>120</sup>

The IRGC remains the Supreme Leader's most powerful institution to counter domestic and international threats. Cooperation between President Ahmadinejad, the Supreme Leader, and the IRGC was evident following the disputed 2009 presidential election.<sup>121</sup> With approval from the Supreme Leader, the IRGC violently suppressed the popular Green Movement protests. Based on the 2009 post-election crackdowns and recent squashing of recent protests sparked by the Arab Spring, some experts believe the IRGC could soon transform Iran into a military state.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>Wright, *Dreams and Shadows*, 332. The President, Mayor of Tehran, and Head of Iran Broadcasting Corporation are all former IRGC officers with service during the Iran-Iraq War.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 333.

<sup>120</sup>Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," 22; Wright, *Dreams and Shadows*, 333.

<sup>121</sup>Iran's clergy has criticized Ayatollah Khamenei for influencing domestic politics by adjudicating the 2009 presidential election in favor of Ahmadinejad.

<sup>122</sup>Asia Society, "The Iran Challenge," 10 February 2011, <http://asiasociety.org/policy-politics/strategic-challenges/intra-asia/missed-opportunities-thwart-progress-us-iran-relatio> (accessed 2 April 2010).

### *Bonyads* (Charitable Foundations)

Iran's *bonyads* are influential business networks within all sectors of Iran's non-petroleum economy.<sup>123</sup> *Bonyads* date back to the time of the Shah. They were originally created to serve humanitarian needs, but were later taken-over by the clerical establishment following the 1979 Revolution. All of the Shah's assets, as well as the assets of his patrons, were placed in the post-revolution *bonyads* under the supervision of the Supreme Leader. Today, the Supreme Leader appoints heads to approximately 100 *bonyads* and provides their only oversight.

Following the Iran-Iraq War, *bonyads* were active in reconstruction and consequently developed the major share in Iran's economy. Today, they are responsible for around one-quarter of Iran's gross domestic product and compete directly with the IRGC for prominence in Iran's economy.<sup>124</sup> Due to their kinship with the Supreme Leader, *bonyads* have impunity from government control and taxation. Their unregulated activities and patronage make *bonyads* perceived as corrupt and the personal banks for clergy and political elites.<sup>125</sup> The Shrine of Imam Reza Foundation (*bonyad*), operated by Ayatollah Vaez-Tabasi, has acquired over 2 billion dollars in assets and controls over 5 percent of Iran's gross domestic product.<sup>126</sup> Vaez-Tabasi is also a member of the

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<sup>123</sup>Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, 57; Milani, —ukes, Kooks, and Democracy in Iran,” 17:45.

<sup>124</sup>Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, 58.

<sup>125</sup>Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia?*, 43.

<sup>126</sup>Andrew Higgins, —Inside Iran's Holy Money Machine,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 June 2007, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118072271215621679.html> (accessed 1 May 2011).

Assembly of Experts and Expediency Council, an example of the nexus of wealth and power to influence within the Islamic Regime.

### The Clergy

Iran's clergy, centered in Iran's holy city of Qom, have a significant role in Iran's domestic and foreign policies.<sup>127</sup> Clerics fill the upper-tier positions of government. Additionally, the clergy maintain social networks that connect the people of Iran with government. The Supreme Leader regards the clergy as a respected and powerful institution, evident by his regular visits to Qom in order to explain controversial actions and policies. He also extends control over the clergy by appointing conservative clerics to key government positions, as Friday prayer leaders, and to head Iran's most notable Islamic organizations and *bonyads*. These institutions enhance the Supreme Leader's ability to propagate religious doctrine and justifications for government transgressions, such as the anointing of President Ahmadinejad in 2009 following controversial election practices.<sup>128</sup>

Iran's two Supreme Leaders, Khomeini (1979 to 1988) and Khamenei (1988 to present), transformed the clergy into a state-like institution with constraints on intellectual freedom. In return for subordination to the Regime's ideology, clerical establishments and seminaries receive government stipends and incentives. Clergy that behave independently, as called for by the tradition of Shi'a Islam, do so at great risk.

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<sup>127</sup>Iranian graduate student, telephone interview by author.

<sup>128</sup>Karim Sadjapour, "The Supreme Leader," in *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 13.

The Regime has a history of purging reformist clerics to maintain stability within the Islamic system.<sup>129</sup> Public challenges to the Supreme Leader's system of rule, extremely rare inside of Iran, has resulted in swift imprisonments, extraditions, and deaths.<sup>130</sup> Despite the personal risk, some high-ranking reformist clerics, most notably the late Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, have challenged the state ideology to voice their support for a more republican and less Islamic government.<sup>131</sup> To the reformist clergy, Islam can accommodate modernity and allow democracy. Iran's political debates are influenced by the split camps of conservatives and reformists within Iran's clergy.<sup>132</sup>

Since the 1979 Revolution, the clergy-government affiliation has reduced the clergy's reverence and legitimacy among the people. Most the clergy are outside government and oppose political Islam, yet they are associated with Iran's mafia-like clerical elites.<sup>133</sup> High-ranking clerics in the government maintain traditional conservative views which are impractical for modern times. The inability to accommodate popular desires has influenced a large portion of Iran's society to secularize. Clerics who demonstrate a concern for the Iranian people in their sermons and writings remain popular with the citizens of Iran. International media complemented three of Iran's most

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<sup>129</sup>Khalaji, "Politics and the Clergy," 27.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>131</sup>Wright, *Dreams and Shadows*, 299-300.

<sup>132</sup>Mehrangiz Kar, "Reformist Islam Versus Radical Islam in Iran," Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, November 2010, [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/11\\_reformist\\_islam\\_kar.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/11_reformist_islam_kar.aspx) (accessed 13 April 2011), 1.

<sup>133</sup>Wright, *Dreams and Shadows*, 298.



revered clerics who encouraged tolerance of internal protests following the 2009 post-election crackdowns.<sup>134</sup>

### Political Factions

In addition to powerful networks formed by the IRGC and *bonyads*, political elites form networks to enhance their respective institutions. Most networks are exclusively aligned with one of the four Iranian political factions (see figure 5).<sup>135</sup> Individual power is largely based on the Supreme Leader's support and confidence, and then on religious and military credentials, financing, and family associations. The Supreme Leader's inner circle consists of his family, staff, and elites from the traditional conservative and principlist factions (see Appendix B). Members of the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations, led by the Supreme Leader's foreign policy confidant, Ali Akbar Velayati, guide the Supreme Leader's decision-making on foreign affairs.<sup>136</sup> Challengers to the Supreme Leader, like Ayatollah Rafsanjani and the reformist faction, have been marginalized following the 2009 presidential election.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup>Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," 10, 52. Grand Ayatollahs Nasser Makarem Shirazi, Abdul Karim Musavi-Ardabil, and Yusuf Sanei criticized the violence used to suppress the Green Movement in 2009. Sanei also advocates a more democratic interpretation of *valayat-e-faqih* or rule by the Supreme Leader.

<sup>135</sup>Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads*, 40.

<sup>136</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>137</sup>*Ibid.*, 50-55, 73. Ayatollah Rafsanjani, Mr. Hossein Musavi, Hojatoleslam Mehdi Karroubi, and Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khatami have all been marginalized in Iran's politics following the 2009 presidential election.

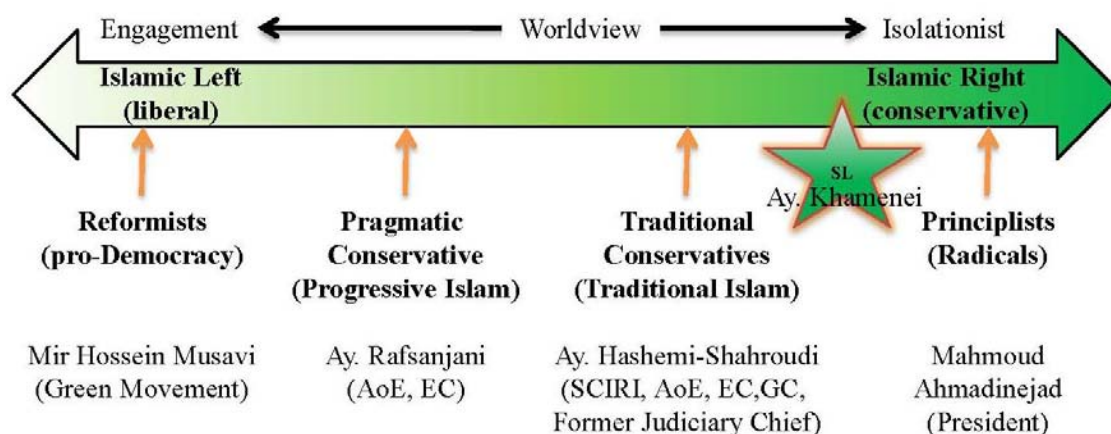


Figure 5. Political Factions and Key Personalities in the Islamic Republic  
 Source: Created by author using information from David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2010), 41.  
 Key: Ay. – Ayatollah, EC – Expediency Council, GC – Guardian Council, SCIRI – Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, SL – Supreme Leader

### Summary

The factionalism and competition within the Islamic Republic causes political incoherence. The IRGC, *bonyads*, and clergy maintain their positions as key power centers in Iran. Today, the IRGC is increasingly powerful due to their large economic enterprise and symbiotic relationship with the Supreme Leader. In comparison, the clergy's reverence, social authority, and overall influence have declined. The President and Parliament (Majles), republican institutions that have historically been filled by clerics, have a predominately laymen character today, another example of the declining influence of clergy in the government.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>138</sup>Farideh Farhi, "The Parliament," in *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 21; Khalaji, "Politics and Clergy," 27. During the first Majles (1906), clerics occupied 49

President Ahmadinejad acts on domestic and foreign issues with alarming independence, which has recently manifested into admonishments by the Supreme Leader.<sup>139</sup> Ahmadinejad's increased influence in Iran, unusual for a second-term president, has aggravated elite rivals and caused further deterioration in political discourse.<sup>140</sup> His support from the IRGC, a requirement to strengthen his office, explains the recent removal of social freedoms in Iran and the absence of a reformist agenda since the 2009 election.<sup>141</sup> The Ahmadinejad led populist faction in government has limited internal debates to the hard-liners and increasingly marginalized the roles of competing institutions, such as the Majles checks on the President's actions.<sup>142</sup> Karim Sadjadpour, an expert on Iran, suggests that Ahmadinejad's power and influence presents a tremendous obstacle to diplomatic relations with Tehran.<sup>143</sup>

Yet the clergy remains a significant player in deciding domestic and foreign policies and must consent for Iran to pursue any rapprochement efforts with the West.

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percent of the 270 seats. Today, clerics occupy 14 percent of the 290 seats. President Ahmadinejad's 2005 presidential victory over notable clerics, Rafsanjani and Karroubi, was a sign of the popular mistrust for clergy in Iran.

<sup>139</sup>Borzou Daragahi and Ramin Mostaghim, "Clash of the Titans in Iran," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 May 2011, 1.

<sup>140</sup>Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," 9.

<sup>141</sup>Kar, "Reformist Islam Versus Radical Islam in Iran," 4.

<sup>142</sup>Shaul Bakhash, "The Six Presidents," in *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010), 18. Basij forces violently suppressed protests following the 2009 presidential election and again in 2011 as Iranians protested along-side the Arab uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia.

<sup>143</sup>Karim Sadjadpour, "Talking with Tehran: With Whom, About What, and How?," in *The Iranian Puzzle Piece*, ed. Amin Tarzi (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2009), 33.

The clergy have been instrumental to change throughout Iran's history due to their capacity to mobilize political factions, power centers, and the people.<sup>144</sup> The Supreme Leader remains Iran's most important cleric, politician, and military commander, roles that endure from the 1979 Constitution. Clerical institutions form the upper tiers of the Islamic Republic's hierarchical system and deliberate over official policies. To date, Iran's clergy has been unwilling to advance new policies that represent a new world outlook and overarching concern for stability in the Middle East. The ailing Supreme Leader benefits from the status quo as openness with the West could stimulate reform within the Islamic Republic.<sup>145</sup> In the next chapter, faith-based diplomacy is described as a way to capitalize on Iran's Islamic character in order to socialize the Iranian Regime with new, favorable policies.

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<sup>144</sup>Kar, "Reformist Islam Versus Radical Islam in Iran," 1.

<sup>145</sup>Sadjadpour, "Talking with Tehran: With Whom, About What, and How?," 25.

## CHAPTER 4

### FAITH-BASED DIPLOMACY

We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning, keeping in mind what has been written. The Holy Koran tells us: "O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another." The Talmud tells us: "The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace." The Holy Bible tells us: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." The people of the world can live together in peace. We know that is God's vision. Now that must be our work here on Earth.

— President Barack Obama  
*Cairo Speech 2009*

This final chapter in the Iran case study explores faith-based diplomacy as an approach to building productive relationships and eventually security cooperation with Iran. In the first section of chapter 4, the purpose, guiding tenets, and limitations to faith-based diplomacy are discussed. The second section to this chapter then describes U.S. policy on religious leader engagements, the best setting for faith-based diplomacy. Through a detailed review of government and non-government roles in faith-based diplomacy, the second section also describes the feasibility of this approach to international affairs in the Middle East. Analysis shows that faith-based diplomacy is a suitable, alternative tactic to engagement with Iran.

## Faith-Based Diplomacy

### Purpose

Faith-based diplomacy integrates religious insights and influence with traditional diplomatic practices (*realpolitik*) for the purpose of peacemaking.<sup>146</sup> The practice of faith-based diplomacy draws from the peacemaking tenets within all religious traditions to evoke respectful relationships, mutual understanding, and tolerance, which are often neglected during official diplomacy.<sup>147</sup> Faith-based diplomacy also encourages contacts with religious leaders, experts on reconciliation, whose support or opposition to conflict greatly influences the Middle East. By operating within a religious framework, creative solutions can emerge that address the root causes of conflicts and represent an unquestionable moral authority's approval to reconcile.<sup>148</sup> A number of Middle East experts, including former Secretary of State James Baker III, endorse this mixing of religion and diplomacy.<sup>149</sup>

The United States commonly addresses security interests in the Middle East using official diplomatic processes. Official diplomats represent the government and thereby have powers to negotiate agreements, treaties, and policies. Official diplomacy typically

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<sup>146</sup>Douglas Johnston, ed., preface to *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xii.

<sup>147</sup>Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy*, 15.

<sup>148</sup>*Ibid.*, 9, 18, 20.

<sup>149</sup>International Center of Religion and Diplomacy, "Endorsements: Religion, Terror, and Error," [http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=364&Itemid=159](http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=364&Itemid=159) (accessed 24 April 2011). James Baker III, Lee Hamilton, and General Anthony Zinni all endorsed Johnston's framework for faith-based diplomacy.

follows a pre-determined agenda involving political, economic, and security factors that, once achieved, will satisfy national interests. Faith-based diplomacy complements official diplomacy by improving understanding and shaping favorable attitudes between long-standing adversaries.<sup>150</sup>

In contrast to official diplomacy, which can have a direct impact on foreign policies and agreements, faith-based diplomacy is a multi-step process that begins in unofficial channels (see Figure 6).<sup>151</sup> The first step focuses on socializing diplomats with more cooperative strategic mind-sets. Through frequent dialogue, this step also entails clarifying assumptions and removing misperceptions that hinder progress.<sup>152</sup> Given the religious cultures of the Middle East, faith-based diplomacy represents a preferred approach to the process of socialization, even if participants represent multiple faiths.<sup>153</sup> Following socialization, faith-based diplomats can then confidently advance new, beneficial policies within their respective communities.

The second stage of faith-based diplomacy requires an expansion of the support base for policy changes beyond the participating elites. To do this, faith-based diplomats must frame the problem in a new way, with a particular attention to how the local situation will improve through security cooperation.<sup>154</sup> This second stage can include

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<sup>150</sup>Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007), 105.

<sup>151</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>152</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>153</sup>Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy*, 8.

<sup>154</sup>Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy*, 24.

media, policy institutes, educators, and government officials. Ultimately, it sets the conditions for the final stage when official security policies, agreements, and treaties are adopted. The third and final stage relies upon an official policymaker who serves as a mentor and advocate for faith-based diplomacy. This mentor maintains the positional power to transition concepts into policy.<sup>155</sup>

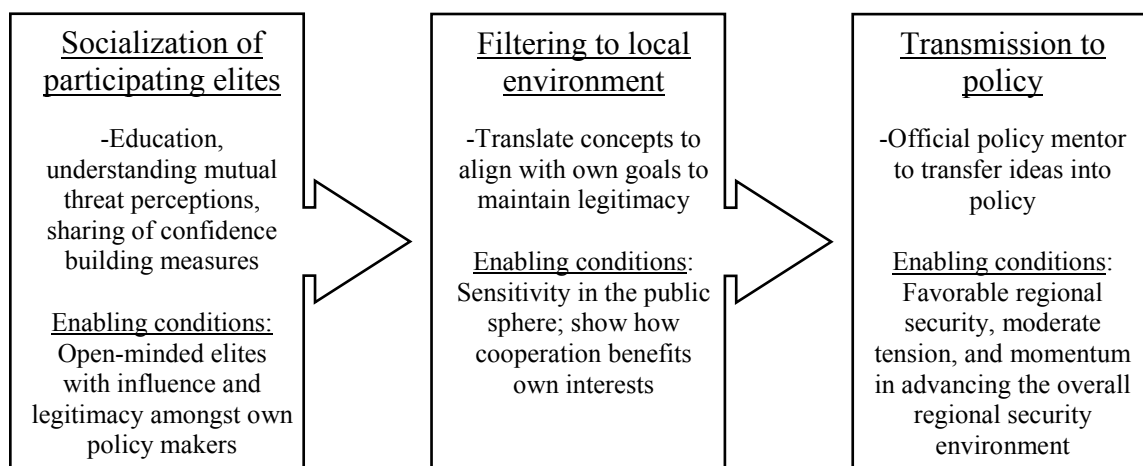


Figure 6. Three Stages to Faith-Based Diplomacy.

Source: Modified from Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy: Track Two Diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007), 21.

### Application and Underlying Principles

Faith-based diplomacy is most relevant when religion is a source of conflict and traditional diplomatic efforts are exhausted. Both religious and lay persons can perform faith-based diplomacy in a variety of forms from impartial observer to official negotiator enacting policy changes. Faith-based diplomats must be qualified to lead theological

<sup>155</sup>Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy*, 24.



discussions and debates over religious practices and teachings, ethical traditions, and religious law, qualifications often limited to religious clergy.<sup>156</sup> Dr. Douglas Johnston, Director of the International Center of Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), has written extensively on the subject of faith-based diplomacy and the ICRD's accomplishments. Johnston's applications, guiding tenets, and diplomat qualifications for faith-based diplomacy are summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Principles of Faith-Based Diplomacy

Applications	Religion is a significant factor in the identity of one or both communities
	Religious leaders can be mobilized to facilitate peace
	Traditional diplomacy has led to extensive paralysis
	Protracted confrontation between two major religious traditions
Tenets	Dependence on spiritual principles and resources (fasting, prayer, breaking bread, forgiveness)
	Operate with spiritual authority
	Pluralistic heart; understand and respect for other traditions
	Transcendent approach to conflict resolution (understanding that there are limits to human rationale)
	Persevere against overwhelming odds (divinely inspired)
Diplomat Qualifications	Pervasive influence and authority in the community, and possibly the state government; ability to network
	A universally respected set of values, including a reputation for trustworthiness and care for the well-being of all peoples
	Unique leverage for reconciling conflicting parties based on unmatched knowledge and cultural insights; ability to humanize relationships and listen attentively
	Capability to mobilize community, national, and international support for peace process and devotion to a peaceful outcome

Source: Created by author with information from Douglas Johnston, ed., *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14, 16, 21.

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<sup>156</sup>Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy*, 242.

## Limitations

There are limitations to faith-based diplomacy, especially when there is a history of mistrust and unstable peace agreements. In the Middle East, overt Western support can reduce legitimacy of faith-based diplomats in pursuit of new policies.<sup>157</sup> Acts of terrorism, natural disasters, democratic revolutions, nuclear revelations, and new leadership can upset progress in all diplomatic efforts. Faith-based diplomats must have official mentors or direct contact with policymakers for their efforts to achieve lasting outcomes. The assassinations of spiritually inspired peacemakers, especially in the Middle East peace process, warn of the physical dangers associated with this form of diplomacy. Yitzhak Rabin of Israel and Anwar Sadat of Egypt were both assassinated by radical nationalists for making concessions towards Middle East peace.

## Examples

Pope John Paul II, Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Grand Ayatollah ali Sistani are examples of religious leaders who inspired peace when political leaders could not. Pope John Paul II is regarded as the twentieth century's most influential peacemaker, even credited by former Soviet leader Michael Gorbachev for the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe.<sup>158</sup> Mahtma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. are iconic religious figures for their determination and leadership to peacefully advance civil rights in India and the United States. During Iraq's reconstruction (2003 to present),

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<sup>157</sup>Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy*, 113.

<sup>158</sup>Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy*, xii.

Grand Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq exerted his religious reverence multiple times to reduce militia violence and encourage democracy.

Select government and non-government institutions, including the U.S. military, have routinely used faith-based dialogue to achieve goals of peace and reconciliation. Two organizations that stand-out due to successes with faith-based approaches to conflict resolution are the ICRD and the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land (CRIHL). CRIHL is a groundbreaking institution in Jerusalem, using faith-based dialogue among Christian, Jewish and Islamic religious leaders to reconcile differences. Since the first meetings in 1997, Israeli and Palestinian religious leaders have agreed to promote a just and comprehensive peace and reconciliation between people of all faiths in the Holy Land and worldwide.”<sup>159</sup>

The ICRD is a Washington based organization created in 2003 to address identity-based conflicts throughout the world. On-going projects by the ICRD include conflicts in Afghanistan, India-Pakistan (Kashmir Region), Iran, Sudan, and the United States.<sup>160</sup> In the Sudan, the ICRD led the formation of an inter-religious council who brokered an end to the 21-year-conflict in 2005. The ICRD then engaged hundreds of Sudan’s Muslim and Christian leaders to assist in peacemaking through their grass-roots influence. These

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<sup>159</sup>Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, “Mission and Goals,” <http://www.crihl.org/> (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>160</sup>International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, “Projects,” [http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogcategory&id=76&Itemid=66](http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=76&Itemid=66) (accessed 15 April 2011).

efforts by the ICRD enabled the passing of a national referendum to separate Sudan's Muslim north and Christian south in July 2011.<sup>161</sup>

The ICRD's project with Iran started with meetings between Iran-U.S. religious delegations in 2003 and 2005 to discuss issues of religion and foreign policy while in the plain view of both governments. The Iran Project allowed the ICRD to establish ecumenical relationships with Iran, clarify perceptions, and improve understanding of the sources for discontent.<sup>162</sup> The Iran Project's next goal is to facilitate a "war game" involving respected political and religious leaders and academic advisors from both nations. The war game will test feasible ways to develop cooperative relationships. The final outcome is a list of acceptable recommendations, sent to each nation's government for consideration.<sup>163</sup>

### Religious Leader Engagement

#### Policy

Official policy documents and the past actions of government institutions support religious leader engagements in the Middle East. The 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) contains the Obama Administration's guidelines for diplomacy in the world.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup>ICRD, "Sudan Project Report 2006," [http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=253&Itemid=105](http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=253&Itemid=105) (accessed 15 April 2011); International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, "Sudan Report," [http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=90&Itemid=114](http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=90&Itemid=114) (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>162</sup>ICRD, "Project Reports: Iran," [http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogcategory&id=94&Itemid=149](http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=94&Itemid=149) (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>163</sup>ICRD, "Project Reports: Iran," [http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=284&Itemid=144](http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=284&Itemid=144) (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>164</sup>The White House, *National Security Strategy*, May 2010, 11.

The Administration's diplomatic vision includes engaging among peoples and beyond government institutions. President Obama promoted this policy to the Muslim world in June, 2009, during a speech in Cairo, Egypt, stating that "Americans are ready to join with citizens and governments, community organizations, religious leaders, and businesses in Muslim communities around the world to help our people pursue a better life."<sup>165</sup> President Obama reinforced this theme to the people of Iran in the 2009, 2010, and 2011 Nowruz addresses to commemorate the Persian New Year. In these speeches, the President encouraged the Iranian Regime to participate in a "new chapter of engagement on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect" and provide "comprehensive diplomatic contacts and dialogue."<sup>166</sup>

The State Department published the first-ever Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) in 2010 to reinforce the Administration's emphasis on diplomacy in foreign affairs. The QDDR describes the 21st Century as an evolving "diplomatic landscape," requiring adaptation to non-state actors that challenge state institutions for influence.<sup>167</sup> Important new networks, tribal and religious leaders, and communities have emerged in the wake of globalization. The QDDR provides the official policy support for non-standard diplomatic tactics such as faith-based diplomacy.

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<sup>165</sup>The White House, "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning," 4 June 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09> (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>166</sup>The White House, "Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz," 20 March 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-marking-nowruz> (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>167</sup>U.S. Department of State, "Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review," 2010, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/153108.pdf> (accessed 15 April 2011), 25.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is a model government organization that engages and collaborates with religious leaders. USAID includes religious leaders in their development efforts throughout the Muslim world, described in a November 2009 USAID report.<sup>168</sup> USAID benefits from the cooperative efforts of Islamic religious leaders on a range of sensitive issues such as reproductive health and family planning, support and tolerance for HIV victims, the education of women, and human rights.<sup>169</sup> The Department of State/USAID Working Group on Religion and Global Affairs serves to enhance the opportunities to engage religious communities and organizations throughout the world. Associated with this working group are training courses and seminars on religion and foreign policy.<sup>170</sup>

### Roles

The following section describes the feasibility of religious leader engagements with Iran by evaluating the capabilities of various institutions, including government organizations, international government organizations, non-governmental organizations, and the American clergy. Neither policies nor doctrine exist to define institutional roles in faith-based diplomacy; therefore, this section attempts to establish reasonable

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<sup>168</sup>USAID, “Issue Brief: The role of Religious Leaders and Communities in Development Efforts in Asia and the Middle East,” November 2009, [www.usaid.gov/locations/asia/documents/Religion\\_AME\\_brief.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia/documents/Religion_AME_brief.pdf) (accessed 27 February 2011). This report states that “USAID aims to engage religious leaders as practicing development actors.”

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 1-8,

<sup>170</sup>Judd Birdsall, Office of International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State, phone interview by author, 21 April 2011. See website for working group details: [https://www.intelink.gov/diplopedia/index.php?title=Religion\\_and\\_Global\\_Affairs\\_Working\\_Group\\_Portal](https://www.intelink.gov/diplopedia/index.php?title=Religion_and_Global_Affairs_Working_Group_Portal) (accessed 1 May 2011).

expectations of select institutions based on precedent. Figure 7 presents the range of resources available to support engagements with Iran's clergy.

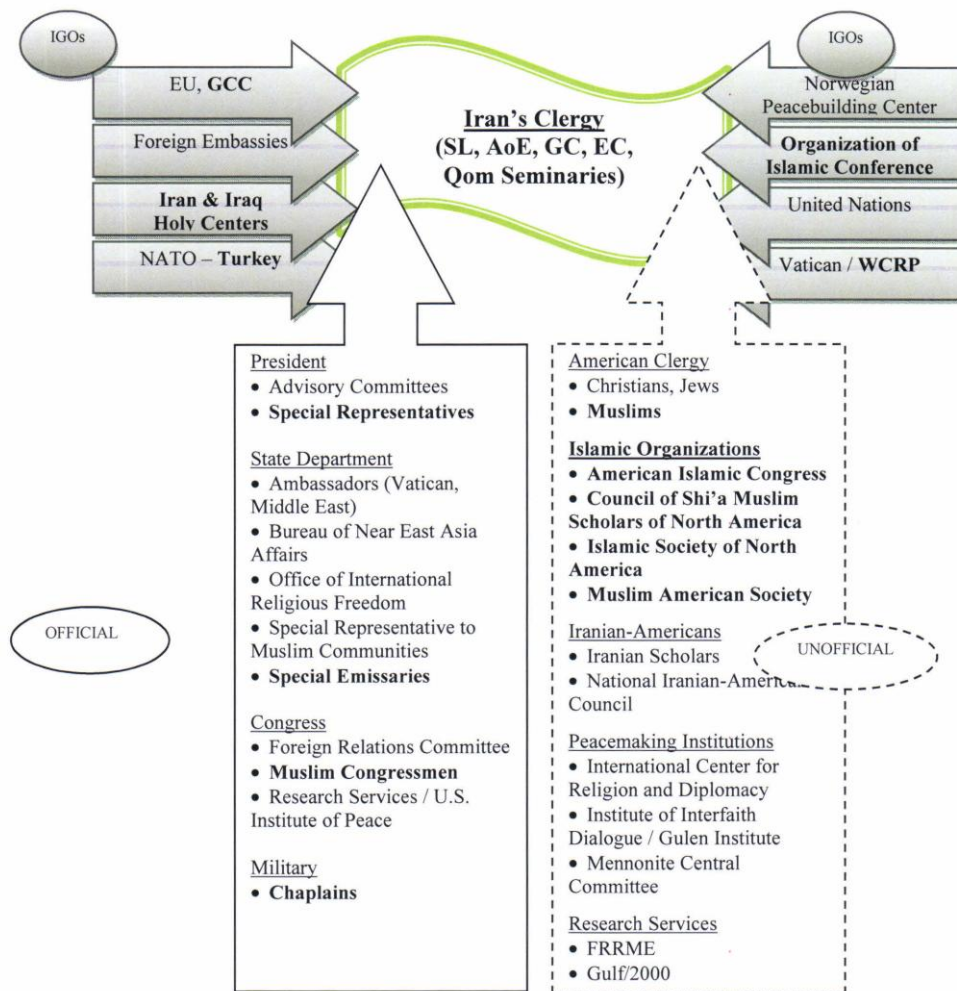


Figure 7. Roles of Governmental Organizations (official), Non-Governmental Organizations (unofficial), and International Organizations in Faith-Based Diplomacy

Source: Created by author

Key: Bold Text Indicates Islamic Institutions; Acronyms: AoE – Assembly of Experts, EU – European Union, EC – Expediency Council, FRRME – Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East, GC – Guardian Council, GCC – Gulf Cooperation Council, IGOs – International Government Institutions, SL – Supreme Leader, WCRP – World Conference on Religion and Peace

## Official Institutions

### President

As the head of state, the U.S. President is the most powerful American diplomat and guides U.S. foreign policy. The President can actively participate in faith-based diplomacy or enable it through policy guidance and appointments. For example, President Ronald Reagan collaborated with Pope John Paul II during the Cold War to end Communism in Eastern Europe. President Reagan valued the Pope's counsel and influence throughout Europe.<sup>171</sup> CIA Director William Casey and Ambassador Vernon Walters served as Vatican emissaries during Reagan's Presidency, even sharing classified intelligence with the Pope. Unified, the Presidents and Pope's policies produced the moral, economic, and political pressure to end Communism in Poland.<sup>172</sup>

Since President Reagan established official diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1984, all U.S. Presidents have engaged with leaders of world religions. In July 2009, President Obama traveled to the Vatican for official dialogue with Pope Benedict XVI. President Obama appeared inspired by the Pope on a range of security and ethical issues and encouraged the Pope to take an increased role in fostering peace in the Middle East.<sup>173</sup> President Obama met with the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, in

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<sup>171</sup>Carl Bernstein, "The Holy Alliance," [http://www.carlbernstein.com/magazine\\_holy\\_alliance.php](http://www.carlbernstein.com/magazine_holy_alliance.php) (accessed 27 February 2011).

<sup>172</sup>Ibid.

<sup>173</sup>Independent Catholic News, "President Obama meets Pope Benedict," 12 July 2009, <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=14602> (accessed 27 February 2011).



February 2010, despite objections from the Chinese Government.<sup>174</sup> President Obama has also sent letters to both Ayatollah Sistani of Iraq and Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran, both considered their nations' most influential Shi'a religious leaders, to encourage their leadership for peace and stability in the Middle East.<sup>175</sup> Recent presidents have enhanced their standing within religious communities by practicing their faiths and accessing spiritual advisors, like the popular Reverend Billy Graham who has been the spiritual advisor to presidents dating back to Eisenhower.<sup>176</sup>

## Congress

As the U.S. legislative body, Congress has the power to influence religious leader engagements through direct involvement, written endorsements, monetary appropriations, and by deliberating over "soft" or "hard" approaches to foreign affairs. The messages and themes emitted from Congress affect the credibility of official and unofficial U.S. diplomats. Iran's government monitors statements by foreign governments, especially the United States. At the present time, several of Congress' trusted advisory boards and policy institutes support engagement with religious leaders in the Middle East.

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<sup>174</sup>CNN Politics, "Obama meets with Dalai Lama despite Chinese objections," 18 February 2010, [http://articles.cnn.com/2010-02-18/politics/obama.dalailama\\_1\\_dalai-lama-tibetans-zhu-weiqun?\\_s=PM:POLITICS](http://articles.cnn.com/2010-02-18/politics/obama.dalailama_1_dalai-lama-tibetans-zhu-weiqun?_s=PM:POLITICS) (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>175</sup>Jason Athanasiadis, "Obama sent second letter to Khamenei," *The Washington Times*, 3 September 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/sep/03/obama-sent-second-letter-to-irans-khamenei/> (accessed 15 April 2011); Barbara Slavin, "Obama Sent a Secret Letter to Iraq's Top Shiite Cleric," *Foreign Policy*, 5 August 2010, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/05/obama\\_sent\\_a\\_secret\\_letter\\_to\\_iraq\\_s\\_top\\_shiite\\_cleric?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/05/obama_sent_a_secret_letter_to_iraq_s_top_shiite_cleric?page=full) (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>176</sup>New York Times, "THE TRANSITION; Billy Graham To Lead Prayer," 9 December 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/09/us/the-transition-billy-graham-to-lead-prayer.html> (accessed 20 April 2011).

The 2006 Iraq Study Group Report, a congressional initiative led by former Representative Lee Hamilton (D-IN), recommended increased dialogue with religious leaders for stability in Iraq. Recommendation number 34 states the following:

Violence cannot end unless dialogue begins, and the dialogue must involve those who wield power, not simply those who hold political office. The United States must try to talk directly to Grand Ayatollah Sistani and must consider appointing a high-level American Shi'a Muslim to serve as an emissary to him. The United States must also try to talk directly to Moqtada al-Sadr, to militia leaders, and to insurgent leaders. The United Nations can help facilitate contacts.<sup>177</sup>

This recommendation is relevant in other Muslim nations, Iran included, where religious leaders wield great influence. The congressionally funded U.S. Institute for Peace also advocates an engagement approach with Iran through the most important Iranian decision makers, including Iran's senior cleric, Ayatollah Khamenei.<sup>178</sup>

Several members of Congress participated in engagements with Iranian religious delegations in 2005, part of the ICRD's Iran Project. In the project report, the ICRD highlights Congressional probing of Iranian religious leaders on a wide range of foreign policy topics.<sup>179</sup> Members of Congress have also participated in events hosted by Islamic organizations, most notable is Representative Keith Ellison (D-MN), Congress' first Muslim representative, who is a regular speaker at the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) conventions.

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<sup>177</sup>James Baker, III and Lee Hamilton, "The Iraq Study Group Report," 2006, [http://media.usip.org/reports/iraq\\_study\\_group\\_report.pdf](http://media.usip.org/reports/iraq_study_group_report.pdf) (accessed 15 April 2011), 46-47.

<sup>178</sup>Daniel Brumberg and Eriks Berzin, "US-Iranian Engagement: Toward A Grand Agenda?," U.S. Institute of Peace, May 2009, <http://library.usip.org/articles/1012224.1106/1.PDF> (accessed 14 April 2011).

<sup>179</sup>ICRD, "Project Reports: Iran," [http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=284&Itemid=144](http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=284&Itemid=144) (accessed 15 April 2011).

## State Department

The State Department represents the U.S. civilian force to advance interests in the world. As a government agency, it directly aids the President in making foreign policy decisions and negotiating peace agreements. State Department institutions that focus on Muslim communities and the Middle East include the Special Representative to Muslim Communities, the Bureau of Near East Asia Affairs, and the Office of International Religious Freedom. The Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, Ambassadors to the Middle East, Jeffrey Feltman, Dennis Ross, and William Burns, and the Special Envoy to Middle East Peace, George Mitchell, represent the senior official diplomats to Iran.<sup>180</sup> The State Department also engages in the Middle East through Islamic organizations. Imam Feisel Abdul Rauf, best known as head of the Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero, and the American Islamic Congress have pursued U.S. interests in the Middle East with financial support from the State Department.<sup>181</sup> For more detailed information on these State Department bureaus and offices, see Appendix A.

## Military

Joint Publication 1-05, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations* (2009), serves as the military's doctrinal reference for chaplain activities in a theater of war. JP 1-05 states that chaplains conduct religious leader engagements with indigenous religious leaders ~~to~~ build trust and confidence, share information, coordinate mutual activities, and maintain

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<sup>180</sup>George Mitchell has announced that he will step down from his post as Ambassador to Middle East Peace.

<sup>181</sup>Zainab al-Suwaij, Executive Director, American Islamic Conference, phone interview by author, 15 April 2011.

influence.”<sup>182</sup> During the first Gulf War (1991), the CENTCOM Command Chaplain fostered a good relationship with Saudi Arabia’s religious leaders to mitigate problems with Western militaries based in their territory. During the ethnic conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1990s), chaplain interactions with local religious leaders contributed to long term stability to the region.<sup>183</sup> And during the recent multi-national operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, chaplains served as key interlocutors for reconciling complex problems.

Most chaplains operate at the tactical level; however, their reverence can provide them access to leaders with strategic influence. In an interview following his deployment in Iraq, V Corps Chaplain Douglas Carver described his access to Iraq’s diverse spiritual leaders, including Ayatollah Sistani’s inner circle, in nation building and reconciliation efforts.<sup>184</sup> He also led a team of military chaplains serving as religious advisors and assistants to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the transitional government in Iraq (2003 to 2004).<sup>185</sup>

Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) Commander (Task Force Leatherneck), learned the importance of religious leader

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<sup>182</sup>Joint Forces Command, JP 1-05, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2009), III-5.

<sup>183</sup>LaMar Griffin, “Strategic Religious Dialogue: A Chaplain’s Perspective on Religious Leader Liaison,” *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 7, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 72.

<sup>184</sup>Jennifer Vedder, “Interview with CH (BG) Douglas Carver,” Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 17 August 2006, [http://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p4013coll13&CISOPTR=300&CISOBX=1&REC=7](http://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p4013coll13&CISOPTR=300&CISOBX=1&REC=7) (accessed 13 April 2011).

<sup>185</sup>Ibid.

engagements during operations in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2006 and later applied this understanding to combat operations in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010. Nicholson's chief chaplains engaged the most influential mullahs in Helmand and Farah Provinces to encourage support for the central government of Afghanistan.<sup>186</sup> Several Taliban or Taliban supporting mullahs joined in reconciliation discussions, a testament to the power and respect for religiously inspired dialogue.<sup>187</sup> Following a religious leader meeting in Farah Province, one Taliban mullah remarked, "I have changed my mind about Americans; I will work with you from now on."<sup>188</sup> In 2011, Army capstone doctrine emphasized the importance of influencing activities, like 2nd MEB's Mullah Engagement Program, to shape attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the people in counterinsurgency operations.<sup>189</sup>

### International Government Organizations

#### Vatican

The Vatican provides a place for unofficial peace talks between Iran and Western nations. Iran maintains strong diplomatic relations with the Vatican. As a benefit of his relations with Iran's clergy, Pope Benedict XVI has effectively persuaded Iran on issues

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<sup>186</sup>Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, briefing to CGSC Class 2011-01, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 7 November 2011.

<sup>187</sup>Commander Philip Pelikan, "Mullah Engagement Program: Helmand and Farah Provinces," *Small Wars Journal* 6, no. 12 (28 December 2010): 8, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/631-pelikan1.pdf> (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>188</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>189</sup>Department of the Army, FM 3-0, C1, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), 6-16.

of religious persecution, human rights, and foreign policy through letters to Iran's President and Supreme Leader.<sup>190</sup> The Pope advocates religious tolerance in Iran and initiated a bi-lateral commission with Iran to protect Iranian Catholics. In return, Iran expects the Vatican to act on the Regime's behalf to ease tensions with the West and intercede if a military confrontation is eminent.<sup>191</sup>

The U.S. Embassy at the Vatican joins in "ongoing efforts with the Vatican to turn interfaith dialogue into actions" in such areas as international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and human rights.<sup>192</sup> The U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican, Miguel H. Diaz, is an expert in theology and an accomplished teacher, author, and leader within American theological societies.<sup>193</sup> He has participated in inter-faith dialogue focused on

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<sup>190</sup>Pope Benedict XVI's requests of Iran are generally accepted. Pope Benedict encouraged the release of 15 British sailors held by Iran in 2007 and has influenced Iran on human rights as was seen in the 2010 adultery case of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani. For more of the Pope's correspondence with Iranian leaders, see Letter to President Ahmadinejad: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/letters/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20101103\\_president-iran\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20101103_president-iran_en.html) (accessed 1 May 2011); Letter to Supreme Leader: [http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2007/April/middleeast\\_April128.xml&section=middleeast&col=](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2007/April/middleeast_April128.xml&section=middleeast&col=) (accessed 1 May 2011).

<sup>191</sup>Jeff Israely, "Iran's Secret Weapon: The Pope," *Time Magazine*, 16 November 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1687445,00.html> (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>192</sup>Embassy of the United States to the Holy See, "Statement by U.S. Ambassador Miguel H. Díaz regarding Wikileaks," 11 December 2010, <http://vatican.usembassy.gov/12112010.html> (accessed 24 April 2011).

<sup>193</sup>U.S. Department of State, "Biography of Ambassador Miguel Diaz," <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/biog/128689.htm> (accessed 15 April 2011).

peacebuilding, the protection of religious freedom, and social justice as a member of the Faith Voices of Common Good, a California based non-profit organization.<sup>194</sup>

## United Nations

Iran maintains an ambassador to United Nations (UN), Mohammad Khazaei who hypocritically remarks that Iran supports the “ideals of the organization [UN] and the purposes and principles of its Charter.”<sup>195</sup> Senior leaders of the Islamic Regime, including the Supreme Leader in 1988, have regularly attended meetings of the General Assembly. However, Iran has a history of violating UN charters and inflammatory rhetoric towards the UN Security Council. The UN has imposed sanctions on Iran for Iran’s failure to abide by special policies of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The UN Human Rights Council recently enacted an independent monitor of Iran in an attempt to reduce Iran’s human rights violations.<sup>196</sup> It has yet to be seen how Iran will respond to additional UN mandates on its activities.

The UN provides country teams and advisors into most regions of the world to promote and protect human rights. Currently, there is a regional office in Lebanon to coordinate UN activities throughout the Middle East. The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq is a recent example of the UN’s application of resources to help stabilize Muslim

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<sup>194</sup>Faith Voices for the Common Good, “About Us,” <http://www.faithvoices.org/about.html> (accessed 24 April 2011).

<sup>195</sup>Permanent Mission of Iran to the UN, [http://www.un-iran.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1](http://www.un-iran.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1) (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>196</sup>United Nations Human Rights Council, “Human Rights Council Creates Mandate on Iran,” 24 March 2011, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=10888&LangID=E> (accessed 15 April 2011).

societies. Religious communities view the UN as a neutral interlocutor. During the reconstruction of Iraq in 2004, the UN served as the critical mediator between Sistani and the CPA. Sistani deferred to a UN commission to settle difference over the formation of the Iraqi government.<sup>197</sup> Then Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Anan, was in direct contact with Sistani, demonstrating the legitimacy of the UN negotiators with Muslim leaders.

### Unofficial Institutions

#### American Clergy

The ability to conduct religious leader engagements with Iran is best supported by the large corps of influential Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious leaders accessible to the United States. One of the key interlocutors with Iran has been Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, former Archbishop of Washington, D.C. He led an ecumenical delegation to Iran in 2003 and participated in a reciprocal trip in 2005. Cardinal McCarrick is well known for promoting human rights throughout much of the world, including China and Iran, and has been honored by the presidents of Lebanon and the United States for his work.<sup>198</sup> In addition to his ecumenical responsibilities, Cardinal McCarrick participates in State Department advisory boards and foreign policy think tanks.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup>Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 217.

<sup>198</sup>Center for Strategic and International Studies, —Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick,” <http://csis.org/expert/cardinal-theodore-e-mccarrick> (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>199</sup>*Ibid.*



The United States is home to a large number of influential imams with their cultural and religious upbringings in the Middle East. Within this group, Shi'a clerics represent the best emissaries to Iran.<sup>200</sup> Several Muslim American clerics have published and preached anti-American rhetoric that resonates within the conservative faction of Iranian clergy; therefore, it is equally important to propagate favorable messages about America's religious tolerance and respect for Islam.<sup>201</sup> Imam al-Qazwini and Imam Feisel Abdul Rauf are trusted leaders of American-Muslim communities that have recently advised and represented U.S. government institutions in both domestic and international affairs.<sup>202</sup>

#### Non-Governmental Organizations

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promote peace and reconciliation in the Middle East through religious leader engagements. NGOs with faith-based approaches include the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East (FRRME), the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). These organizations include experts in diplomacy that maintain cooperative relationship with the U.S. government and military. Other prominent NGOs that focus on the Iran-U.S. estrangement include Gulf/2000, the Institute of Near East &

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<sup>200</sup> al-Suwaij, phone interview by author.

<sup>201</sup> Ahlul Bayt News Agency, "Top American Muslim Leader: 'Ayatollah Khamenei, the best leader in the world'," 1 January 2011, <http://www.abna.ir/data.asp?lang=3&Id=219300> (accessed April 15, 2011). Radical American cleric Abdul alim Musa is director of Masjid Al-Islam in Washington, D.C. His pro-Khamenei rhetoric is covered by Iran's Ahlul Bayt News Agency.

<sup>202</sup> al-Suwaij, phone interview by author.

Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA), and the Gulf Research Center (GRC). NGOs have the most experience engaging with Muslim leaders in the Middle East. They offer venues for religious leaders to share information, organize conferences for regional security discussions, and have a legacy of active participation by many Islamic states including Iran due to their openness and neutrality in resolving conflict.<sup>203</sup> For more on capabilities of the FRRME, ICRD, and MCC, see detailed descriptions in Appendix A.

### Summary

Both the 2010 NSS and QDDR encourage a range of engagement approaches to Iran. Religious leader engagements are not discussed in these policy documents, yet the past actions of presidents, members of Congress, and the military have all demonstrated a willingness to engage religious leaders in the Middle East on topics of security and human rights. The UN, Vatican, and non-governmental organizations are also important actors in conflict resolution, and at times, have proven to be acceptable interlocutors to religious leaders in the Middle East.

Based on his first-term in Office, President Obama appears comfortable with including religious leaders in executive level dialogue. President Obama has reached out to Muslim communities and leaders through speeches and special offices that act on his behalf. The White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships is the President's advisory council for promoting partnerships between the federal government and religious organizations.<sup>204</sup> And the President's special envoy to the Organization of

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<sup>203</sup>Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy*, 49-52.

<sup>204</sup>The White House, Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ofbnp> (accessed 6 March 2011).

the Islamic Conference, Rashad Hussain, enables stronger ties with both foreign and domestic Islamic religious leaders.<sup>205</sup>

Ten years of conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq have improved the U.S. government's understanding of Islam, religious aspects of conflict, and the importance of Islamic religious leaders in politics. Based on past actions, some members of Congress and their constituents support diplomacy with Iran, including religious leader engagements. Likewise, the State Department recently expanded its capacity to engage Muslim communities and religious leaders. U.S. governing institutions have also demonstrated support for special emissaries or third party organizations, like the UN, that offer expertise and can by-pass the historical aversion between the Muslim world and the West.

As a general principle, the prestige of a cleric is more respected by Islamic religious leaders than the power attributed to U.S. government officials.<sup>206</sup> Legitimacy with the indigenous leaders and theological training make the U.S. clergy and military chaplains the most trusted and qualified peacebuilders in the Muslim world.<sup>207</sup> A large multi-faith corps of U.S. clergy exists, including a small number of Shi'a clerics with insight into Iran's politics. The Vatican and other Holy Centers (Qom, Najaf, and Jerusalem) are respected venues for religious leader engagements.

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<sup>205</sup>The Organization of the Islamic Conference includes ambassadors from the majority of Muslim nations.

<sup>206</sup>Chaplain (COL) LaMar Griffin, Chief of Chaplains, the Pentagon, phone interview by author, 21 January 2011; Parsi, phone interview by author.

<sup>207</sup>Griffin, —Strategic Religious Dialogue,” 73.

The application of faith-based diplomacy to the Iran-U.S. estrangement is fitting and feasible. The model of traditional diplomacy has proven ineffective when dealing with Iran. Based on the evidence presented in this chapter, faith-based diplomacy is familiar to Iranian and U.S. governing institutions and is an acceptable means to advance national interests. A rather large capacity to conduct faith-based diplomacy exists, further detailed in Appendix A, and serves as an added incentive to explore this approach with Iran. In the next chapter, “Conclusions and Recommendations,” the conclusions from this study are summarized and connected to reinforce the thesis, that faith-based diplomacy is a suitable tactic for the Iran-U.S. estrangement. The final section of the chapter, “Recommendations,” provides suggestions on “how to” conduct faith-based diplomacy with Iran.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this research was to identify if faith-based diplomacy is an acceptable and feasible tactic to engage Iran in purposeful dialogue, a requirement for rapprochement between the two nations and increased stability in the Middle East. For the past five U.S. administrations, U.S. foreign policy towards Iran has defaulted to containment with limited diplomatic contact. The deep-rooted causes for the Iran-U.S. estrangement (presented in chapter 2) and the clergy's influence in Iran's government and society (presented in chapter 3) suits a new tactic of engagement—faith-based diplomacy (presented in chapter 4). Faith-based diplomacy offers a new incentive for engagement, given the history of failed *realpolitik*. Faith-based diplomats have historically persevered, when others could not, to build trusting relationships, improve understanding, and socialize new and cooperative mind-sets.<sup>208</sup>

This final chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations. The conclusions section begins with a summary of four major findings from the Iran case study. Together, these findings suggest an advantage of faith-based diplomacy over traditional forms of diplomacy with Iran. Then, the conclusions section analyzes strengths and weaknesses of faith-based diplomacy with Iran to understand the best circumstances for success. Faith-based diplomacy meshes with Iran's Islamic culture, yet

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<sup>208</sup>Birdsall, phone interview by author. For example, President Clinton commissioned a group of three American religious leaders to diffuse tensions with China over human rights and religious expression. Following three weeks and 50 high-level meetings, the religious delegation established a long-term commitment from the Chinese government to increase religious tolerance.

it still faces many traditional and even new challenges to diplomacy. The recommendations section completes this study by suggesting ways to pursue faith-based diplomacy towards improved dialogue with Iran. The recommendations and supporting appendices serve as a primer for future studies on this important topic.

### Summary of Findings

The first part of this study, chapter 2, analyzed the Iran-U.S. relationship from the perspective of ruling elites. From Iran's perspective, the United States has repeatedly undermined Iran's rights in pursuit of U.S. security interests and oil. Instigation of the 1953 coup in Iran, support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, and on-going efforts to impede Iran's nuclear program are cases where the U.S. has directly challenged Iranian sovereignty or interests. Iran became increasingly concerned when the United States expanded its military footprint into Afghanistan and Iraq following the 9/11 attacks. Iran initially cooperated with the United States in these operations out of fear of the United States as an existential threat on their borders; however, as the U.S. reconstruction efforts became bogged-down in Iraq (2004 to 2006), Iran's fear subsided. Iran is now responsible for the most organized spoiling campaign in Iraq and they are overt financial supporters of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Anti-American ideology prevails in the principlist and conservative factions within Iran's government, which is regularly expressed by both Iran's President and Supreme Leader. Today, Iran perceives themselves as strong in relation to the outside world, impervious to foreign pressure, and restoring its geopolitical standing in the Middle East.

The United States maintains a comparable suspicion and enmity for the Iranian Regime. Loathing of Iran reached a peak in 1979, as Iran seized the U.S. Embassy in

Tehran and took 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. Iran's material support of the Taliban and insurgent groups in Iraq contributes to the killing of American and Coalition soldiers. Policy institutes and recent films, like *Iranium*, have warned government officials that a nuclear armed Iran would not hesitate to attack the U.S. homeland to catastrophic ends.<sup>209</sup> Building productive relationships with Iran that evoke trust and understanding is profoundly challenged by on-going hostilities, historical mistrust, and the absence of diplomatic contact for over 30 years [finding 1].

The second part of this study, chapter 3, analyzed the power politics of Iran to determine how foreign policy and domestic behavior are regulated. Iran's theocracy, unique to the modern world and the product of exceptional circumstances, greatly deviates from the tradition of Shi'a clergy quietism. The 1979 hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq War subdued the majority opposition by both laypersons and clergy to Khomeini's extreme form of political Islam. Today, Iran maintains an unbalanced mixing of Islamic and Republican government institutions. The clergy controls three-quarters of the government institutions as well as Iran's largest social network. The upper-tiers of Iran's government are completely Islamic, which allows state clergy to invoke their jurisprudence over all of Iran's state policies. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the Guardian Council represent the two most-powerful Islamic institutions and tend

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<sup>209</sup>Iranium the Movie, <http://www.iraniumthemovie.com/> (accessed 28 April 2011).

to marginalize the authority of the predominately non-religious institutions—the President and the Majles.<sup>210</sup>

The IRGC, charitable foundations (*bonyads*), and Qom based seminaries represent important informal powers that, through elaborate networks, extend their influence into government. The IRGC is on a trajectory to increase its already large share in Iran's economy, foreign affairs, and domestic politics. At the same time, the IRGC's founding purpose, to preserve the Islamic system, continues to ensure the longevity of Islamic institutions. Following Iran's disputed 2009 presidential elections, the IRGC appears ready to thwart internal and external opposition forces. Consequently, for the foreseeable future, the clergy will maintain its control over Iran's official policies and will sanction actions to relieve both domestic and international pressures [finding 2].

The third part of this study, chapter 4, analyzed faith-based diplomacy as a diplomatic track with Iran. Iran has demonstrated a resistance to traditional forms of diplomacy with the United States for 30 years. The most recent engagement occurred in January 2011 as the United States and other members of the UN Security Council met with an Iranian delegation in Turkey. This engagement ended as a failure and did not establish conditions for continued dialogue.<sup>211</sup> Neither the Iranian nor U.S. governments have advanced bold, creative, and mutually acceptable approaches to engagement. One

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<sup>210</sup>Mehdi Khalaji, "Iran's Continuing Power Struggle," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 April 2011, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3352> (accessed 2 May 2011).

<sup>211</sup>Islamic Republic News Agency, "G5+1 was empty-handed and miscalculated in Istanbul," 23 January 2011, <http://www.irna.ir/ENNewsShow.aspx?NID=30202722> (accessed May 2, 2011). Iran insists that upholding its right to uranium enrichment and an end to sanctions are required for cooperation; Iran refutes that these are pre-conditions and violate previous agreements made with the P5+1 in Geneva, 2010.



fundamental problem has been relying on secular models for diplomacy with Iran. Iran's chief negotiator, Saeed Jalili, has written extensively on the role of Islam and Holy Scriptures (Koran) in determining foreign policy.<sup>212</sup> Engagement tactics must respect and accommodate the differences in Iran's non-secular government, such as the Supreme Leader, the state clergy, and theologically inspired policy elites. The application of faith-based diplomacy to the Iran-U.S. prolonged estrangement is suitable to break the diplomatic deadlock [finding 3].

The Obama Administration's written policy and messages to Iranian officials have expressed sincerity to engage with the Iranian government, communities, and people. The constitutional separation of church and state in the United States is not compromised by faith-based diplomacy with Iran. The policies and actions of presidents, the State Department, and other government institutions have all integrated religious leader engagements in support of overall diplomatic efforts. Iran has also participated in religious leader engagements with foreign delegations and boasts the world's second largest diplomatic corps to the Vatican. The International Center for Religion and Diplomacy and the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land are leading advocates for faith-based diplomacy with Muslim nations, and join a long list of government institutions, non-governmental organizations, international clergy, and others capable of supporting faith-based diplomacy. Faith-based diplomacy with Iran is both acceptable and feasible [finding 4].

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<sup>212</sup>Reuters, "Iran's new atomic negotiator Saeed Jalili," 23 October 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/10/23/us-iran-nuclear-jalili-idUSL239329720071023> (accessed May 2, 2011). Saeed Jalili is Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council which decides Iran's national security policies under the supervision of the Supreme Leader.

## Conclusions

### Strengths of Faith-Based Diplomacy

#### Application to Iran-U.S. Estrangement

The Iran-U.S. protracted estrangement meets all four of the faith-based diplomacy application criteria presented in chapter 4, Table 1. First, religion is a significant factor in the identity of Iran; second, there is a protracted confrontation between two major religious traditions or cultures; third, religious leaders are available to facilitate peace; and finally, traditional diplomatic efforts have consistently failed.<sup>213</sup> From his experience facilitating peace in the Holy Land among Christians, Jews, and Muslims, Canon Trond Bakkevig believes faith-based diplomacy is instrumental to the peace process with any Muslim country or community.<sup>214</sup> Bakkevig observed religious leaders of all faiths introduce great leadership, knowledge, insight, and judgment when dealing with contentious issues in Jerusalem.<sup>215</sup>

Doug Johnston, President of the ICRD, shares a similar view as Bakkevig's from his experiences in the company of Iranian religious delegations. "Religion is the only thing they trust. It has an amazing influence on their way of thinking," Johnston remarked in reference to the nature of Iran's political elites and society.<sup>216</sup> Religious leaders are

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<sup>213</sup> Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy*, 14,16,21.

<sup>214</sup> Trond Bakkevig, "Religious dialogue and the quest for peace in the Middle East," February 2011, [http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow\\_site/storage/original/application/e954e530c0f574c541b70ad7e0cc1568.pdf](http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/e954e530c0f574c541b70ad7e0cc1568.pdf) (accessed 1 May 2011), 1.

<sup>215</sup> Trond Bakkevig, "Religious dialogue as a Contribution to Political Negotiations," unpublished, included in email message to author, 28 April 2011.

<sup>216</sup> Douglas Johnston, President of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, phone interview by author, 25 May 2011.

most capable at identifying religious sources of conflict and the universal Scriptures that inspire reconciliation, and therefore have an exclusive role in shaping the narrative that informs governments and communities.<sup>217</sup> Religious leaders are often closely linked to political institutions, especially in Muslim countries, and therefore can influence policy decisions in a variety of ways, such as through writings, interviews, sermons, religious rulings, and direct liaison with official policymakers.

Iran's government places state-clergy in the middle of domestic politics and foreign policy decision-making. Senior political leaders, including the Supreme Leader, are theologically trained and maintain respect for religion. The ability for faith-based diplomats from Iran to directly control policies or enter political debates is a new avenue to influence Iran's behavior. Because of the growing division between the President and the Supreme Leader in 2011, the Supreme Leader may readily place more authority with the clerical establishment to relieve Iran's international pressures.<sup>218</sup> Faith-based diplomacy with the West could be the best means for the clerical establishment to regain lost trust and respect with their society.

#### Enhanced Peacebuilding Techniques

Faith-based diplomats use four peacebuilding techniques that are often absent in traditional forms of diplomacy. These techniques include the following: offering a new vision; building relationships to communicate respective needs and aspirations; mediation to end hostilities and resolve sources of conflict; and address historical grievances to

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<sup>217</sup>Bakkevig, "Religious dialogue and the quest for peace in the Middle East," 2.

<sup>218</sup>Khalaji, "Iran's Continuing Power Struggle."

remove feelings of injustice.<sup>219</sup> Given the absence of these steps in previous Iran-U.S. engagements, faith-based diplomacy offers a new, potentially favorable methodology for rapprochement. Once dignity is restored and respect is established, both Iran and the United States can advance mutual interests.

The support of religious leaders and religious laws for peacebuilding is critical to the peace of all entrenched conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>220</sup> To allow socializing with non-Muslims, which conflicts with Khomeini's anti-Western ideology, the interpretation of Islamic Law (*shari'ah*) over new-found issues, known as *ijtihad*, may be necessary. In Iran, *ijtihad* is acceptable and performed by a committee of Islamic jurists similar to the American Supreme Court's interpretations of the Constitution.<sup>221</sup> Iran's Supreme Leader and the Shiite clerical establishment could then enhance faith-based diplomacy by sanctioning it according to God's Law.

#### Use of Spiritually Inspired Diplomats

The Iranian clergy's respect for other religious leaders and theologians, even non-Muslims, increases their willingness to develop productive relationships with foreign delegates.<sup>222</sup> The ability to hold theologically astute dialogue establishes common ground, trust, and a sense of compatible motives for reconciliation.<sup>223</sup> Clerical opinions

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<sup>219</sup>Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy*, 18.

<sup>220</sup>*Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>221</sup>Yusuf Kavakci, Islamic Law scholar from Turkey, e-mail message received by author, 21 May 2011.

<sup>222</sup>Johnston, phone interview by author. Parsi, phone interview by author.

<sup>223</sup>Parsi, phone interview by author.

wield influence and legitimacy within their own communities and government due to expert knowledge of religion, religious laws, and culture. According to Chaplain (COL) LaMar Griffin, Multi-National Force Iraq (MNF-I) command chaplain during the surge in Iraq (2007 to 2008), “holding the prestige of a cleric is absolutely critical to engaging with Shi‘a, Sunni, as well as non-Muslim religious leaders.”<sup>224</sup> Chaplain Griffin supported the U.S. State Department’s liaison with clerics within Iraq’s Governing Council and President Maliki’s staff. His reflections suggest clerical involvement is critical to advance interests with Iran.

### Weaknesses of Faith-Based Diplomacy

#### Middle East History and Ideology

A RAND Corporation study describes changing the Middle East’s long-standing security cooperation agreements as a tremendous challenge to diplomacy, including unofficial approaches.<sup>225</sup> There is resistance to compromise due to fear of losing geopolitical standing, and in the case of Iran, the fidelity of the Islamic system. The RAND study concludes that re-shaping the strategic mind-set of Middle East security elites requires time, indigenous processes, the portrayal of self-gains to the community, and transparency of Western goals.<sup>226</sup> The Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad have stated their intent to engage with the United States and increase cooperation; however, their periodic inflammatory rhetoric raises doubts about any possible

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<sup>224</sup>Griffin, phone interview by author.

<sup>225</sup>Kaye, *Talking to the Enemy*, 106.

<sup>226</sup>Ibid.

cooperation.<sup>227</sup> The Supreme Leader and other Regime elites benefit from the status quo and any rapprochement with the West could spark democratic reforms that directly challenge their authority.<sup>228</sup>

Iran's powerful elites, clergy, and institutions still maintain a suspicion and loathing of the United States instilled by the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Khomeini perceived the United States as everything evil in the world and ~~the~~ enemies of God."<sup>229</sup> Likewise, many Americans believe Iran's nefarious activities in the world will continue until the Islamic system is replaced by a full-democracy. Reducing the long-standing ideological enmity and socializing new attitudes and beliefs, the first step of faith-based diplomacy, is greatly challenged by the legacy of Khomeini and Iran's illicit behaviors.

#### Iran's Domestic Politics

The internal political jockeying between principlist, conservative, and reformist political factions is another complicating factor in Iranian foreign policy and has resulted in incoherent policies over the past three decades. Iran's internal politics, such as the control of key institutions and ministries, influences how political elites and state clergy view controversial engagement policies. A relationship with the United States offers strategic incentives for Iran, but it could also undermine the self-interests of many elites

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<sup>227</sup>Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia?*, 74.

<sup>228</sup>Sadjadpour, "Talking to Tehran: With Whom, About What, and How?," 25.

<sup>229</sup>Khalaji, "The Last Marja," 6.

throughout all political factions. Even reformists may try to block efforts for rapprochement due to concerns of an empowered President and the Islamic Regime.<sup>230</sup>

The changing nature of Iranian politics could abruptly undo any progress made in rapprochement towards the United States.<sup>231</sup> Issues that maintain the greatest attention of the United States and the UN, such as the nuclear issue or Green Movement activism, are fringe issues in Iran that receive sporadic and fleeting government attention.<sup>232</sup> Domestic issues or spoiling activities could quickly disrupt faith-based diplomatic partnerships. With Iran's parliamentary election set for 2012 and presidential election in 2013, Iran's government is unlikely to support a major policy shift towards engagement until after a new government is formed.

#### Iran's Supreme Leader and Clerical Establishment

The aging Supreme Leader has a pivotal role when deciding the nature of Iran's international relations. Khamenei's siding with Ahmadinejad in the 2009 presidential election placed him in the center of Iran's politics, a position Khamenei is likely to maintain until his death. In 2011, Khamenei again reasserted his authority in Iranian politics to settle a power dispute with President Ahmadinejad and his principlist loyalists.<sup>233</sup> Khamenei will protect his power at all cost, which he perceives is at stake

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<sup>230</sup>Jo-Anne Hart, Professor of International Studies at Brown University, phone interview by author, 29 April 2011.

<sup>231</sup>Ibid.

<sup>232</sup>Khalaji, "Iran's Continuing Power Struggle."

<sup>233</sup>Geneive Abdo, "Rooting for Khamenei," *Foreign Policy*, 10 May 2011, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/10/Rooting\\_for\\_Khamenei](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/10/Rooting_for_Khamenei) (accessed 10 May 2011).

when pursuing rapprochement with the United States and the West. Therefore, he may immediately block any requests for faith-based dialogue.<sup>234</sup> Experts believe Iran's government is pragmatically driven by interests and geopolitical standing, so that Islamic and anti-Western ideology could be sacrificed for real gains, even by the Supreme Leader.<sup>235</sup> A dramatic breakthrough with Khamenei, similar to President Nixon's grand initiative towards China in 1972, is necessary to open the door for faith-based diplomacy.<sup>236</sup>

Over the past two decades, Khamenei instituted reforms within the clerical establishment that removed independent thought and activities.<sup>237</sup> The Supreme Leader's ability to control religious pensions, censor activity, and punish dissident clerics has created a symbiotic relationship between the government and the clerical establishment.<sup>238</sup> Few clerics in Iran have the popularity and security guarantees to act against the expressed wishes of the Supreme Leader. Clergy who participate in unauthorized, behind-the-scenes dialogue risk imprisonment, exile, or death. The

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<sup>234</sup>Sadjadpour, "Talking to Tehran: With Whom, About What, and How?," 25.

<sup>235</sup>Hart, phone interview by author.

<sup>236</sup>American Experience, "Richard M. Nixon: Nixon's China Game," PBS Website, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/china/peopleevents/pande01.html> (accessed 9 May 2011). The US-Iran relationship resembles the long period of mistrust and insults that the United States faced with China in 1969. Nixon's themes and messages encouraged a warming of relations with China. Beginning with a ping-pong delegation to China in 1971, a series of secret negotiations fostered common interests and commitment to improve relations between governments. A dramatic breakthrough in relations followed historic meetings between President Nixon and Chairman Mao in China, 1972.

<sup>237</sup>Khalaji, "The Last Marja," 29-30, 36.

<sup>238</sup>Ibid., 29-30.



Mennonite Central Committee's 2007 engagement with Iranian clergy had unequivocal support from state leaders, including Iran's President, the Supreme Leader, and the Foreign Minister, an important protocol to follow in future engagements.

The politicization of Iran's clerical establishment has increased its likeness to a secular government organization with experts in negotiations, media exposure, and financing.<sup>239</sup> Government influence has severely restricted moderate and reformist activities. Reformist clerics who embrace modernity tend to hold no power, or remain outwardly apolitical, as to not draw attention from the Regime. For different reasons, both traditionalists and conservatives within Iran's clerical establishment, generally oppose religious leader engagements with foreign emissaries. Traditionalists view this type of engagement as political, and therefore against Shi'a tradition. Conservative clerics believe engagement will undermine state ideology and their efforts to reject Western influence. Government clergy of all worldviews are subject to the political landscape in Iran, and therefore could assess faith-based diplomacy as too bold and risky to themselves and their networks.

### U.S. Domestic Politics

Much like Iran, the U.S. government and public is not monolithic with regard to engagement with Iran. The current Administration's policy for engagement is under attack by politicians and policy institutes for demonstrating too much patience and

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<sup>239</sup>Ibid., 30.

sensitivity to the Middle East security environment.<sup>240</sup> Many U.S. officials believe engagement is a form of surrender.<sup>241</sup> The Congressionally funded “Iran Primer” lecture series and publication sets-out to inform governments of Iran’s changing political, social, and economic environment. This effort, along with a large volume of editorials since 2002, suggests low satisfaction with the current policies and rising concerns over Iran’s behavior.

Senator Joe Lieberman (D-CT), a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, has expressed caution over the diplomatic approach towards Iran, which allows Iran’s nuclear program to advance.<sup>242</sup> Dealing with Iran has not yet become a grand initiative of the Obama Administration nor has it entered into the forefront of the national debate; however, it remains a polarizing issue in American politics.<sup>243</sup> Congress has largely responded to Iran’s transgressions by approving sanctions and condemning illicit behavior, rather than pursuing new ways to ensure long-term peace. In June 2010, Congress passed the toughest sanctions package ever against Iran by an overwhelming

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<sup>240</sup>See writings by the Center for Security Policy, such as Frank Gaffney’s “The Denuclearizers Dangerous Ambitions,” Center for Security Policy, 27 December 2010, <http://204.96.138.161/p18609.xml> (accessed 1 May 2011).

<sup>241</sup>Ronald E. Neumann, “When U.S. Iranian Negotiations Start: A Primer,” in *The Iranian Puzzle Piece*, ed. Amin Tarzi (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2009), 41.

<sup>242</sup>Jim Meyers, “Lieberman: U.S. Should Attack Iran's Nuclear Program If All Else Fails,” *Newsmax.com*, 12 April 2010, <http://www.newsmax.com/Headline/lieberman-iran-nuclear-attack/2010/04/12/id/355512> (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>243</sup>White House, “George W. Bush: State of the Union Address,” 29 January 2002, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> (accessed 7 May 2011). George W. Bush referenced Iran’s evil nature in his 2002 State of the Union address sparking much policy debate over the Islamic Republic.

margin.<sup>244</sup> Only a few members of Congress voiced concerns that sanctions cripple the people of Iran and strengthen the current Regime.

Representative Keith Ellison (D-MN), Congress' first Muslim representative, has been an out-spoken critic of sanctions on Iran; however, he too voted in favor of the 2010 sanctions.<sup>245</sup> Leading voices for engagement reside outside of government and within a growing Iran lobby in the United States.<sup>246</sup> It is unlikely that faith-based diplomacy will receive much attention or overt support from government officials, especially given the perception of religious encroachment into secular affairs. Without endorsement from a high-level official, such as a member of the National Security Council, faith-based diplomacy would offer no incentive to Iran.<sup>247</sup> Furthermore, any advancement in relations by faith-based diplomats could be upturned by the necessary legislation to remove

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<sup>244</sup>Senate Voting Record 99-0, House Voting Record 408-8 found at: [http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll\\_call\\_lists/roll\\_call\\_vote\\_cfm.cfm?congress=111&session=2&vote=00199](http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=111&session=2&vote=00199); <http://www.opencongress.org/vote/2010/h/394> (accessed 1 May 2011).

<sup>245</sup>Keith Ellison, "Why Increased U.S. Sanctions on Iran Don't Work," *The Huffington Post*, 26 October 2009, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rep-keith-ellison/why-increased-us-sanction\\_b\\_333894.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rep-keith-ellison/why-increased-us-sanction_b_333894.html) (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>246</sup>Clare Lopez, "Rise of the 'Iran Lobby': Tehran's front groups move on-and into-the Obama Administration," Center for Security Policy, 25 February 2009, [http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/p17907.xml?genre\\_id=3](http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/p17907.xml?genre_id=3) (accessed 15 April 2011). There are several Islamic and Iranian Organizations in the United States that lobby for a peaceful approach to Iran. These include the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), National Iranian-American Council (NIAC), and the Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran (CASMI). The Center for Security Policy, a Washington think tank, has described these groups as a growing Iran lobby nesting within the Obama Administration.

<sup>247</sup>Johnston, phone interview by author.

restrictions on Iran.<sup>248</sup> In order for faith-based diplomacy to proceed, the United States government would need to express support for the

### Spoilers

The nature of Iran's competitive system is prone to inhibit any Iran-U.S. rapprochement efforts. A change in political and economic structure in Iran, which is a potential outcome of faith-based diplomacy, would incite preemptive actions by Iran's disparate power centers. Assassination attempts of faith-based diplomats or key supporters should be anticipated. Terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas may increase attacks fearing an end to Iran's support.<sup>249</sup> Israel could also spoil advancements in the Iran-U.S. relationship through a preventative military airstrike on Iran's nuclear facilities.<sup>250</sup> Israel benefits from a privileged relationship with the United States, which is jeopardized by improved Iran-U.S. relations. Iran and the international community are likely to interpret any military action by Israel as an extension of U.S. foreign policy, and therefore would abruptly stop all engagements.

### Recommendations

The successful implementation of a prolonged and goal-oriented faith-based diplomatic track with Iran should be studied by the U.S. State Department with support from respected policy institutes. In 2008, the Chicago Council of Global Affairs and a

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<sup>248</sup>Neumann, "When U.S.-Iranian Negotiations Start: A Primer," 41.

<sup>249</sup>Sadjadpour, "Talking to Tehran: With Whom, About What, and How?," 35.

<sup>250</sup>Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Point of No Return," *The Atlantic* 306, no. 2, (September 2010): 64.

task force of 32 foreign policy and religion experts addressed how to best integrate religion into U.S. foreign policy efforts. The resulting 2010 report, “Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for U.S. Foreign Policy,” presents nine recommendations on how to engage religious communities effectively. Included in these recommendations are to expand the responsibility of religious engagements to government institutions, clarify Constitutional language on religion and foreign policy, and engage religious parties that oppose U.S. interests.<sup>251</sup>

A similar study by a special initiatives group could set the conditions for an Iran Project. Respected institutes, such as the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Brookings Institute, or the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, could head planning efforts given their experience, access to both national and international policy experts, and their respect with both government and non-government institutions. The initial planning focus should be conceptual in nature, to understand Iranian tendencies and then develop a broad approach to achieve a suitable end state.<sup>252</sup> Immediate planning milestones should include: defining the current and historic diplomatic challenges with Iran; defining the role of the U.S. President, government officials, and official mentors; recruiting faith-based diplomats, facilitators, and supporting experts; and developing an initial timeline.

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<sup>251</sup>R. Scott Appleby, Richard Cizik, and Thomas Wright, “Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for U.S. Foreign Policy,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2010, [http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/Task%20Force%20Reports/2010%20Religion%20Task%20Force\\_Full%20Report.pdf](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/UserFiles/File/Task%20Force%20Reports/2010%20Religion%20Task%20Force_Full%20Report.pdf) (accessed 10 May 2011), 8-14,

<sup>252</sup>Department of the Army. Field Manual (FM) 5-0. *The Operations Process*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), 3-7. The conceptual methodology described is termed “Design” in Army doctrine.

## The Process

### Plan

For the United States to present authenticity in the process, faith-based diplomats should include highly-respected religious leaders within America's pluralistic society. Including religious leaders from Abrahamic traditions (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) is acceptable. Shi'a Muslim clergy, especially those who have studied in Qom seminaries, provide additional cultural and religious understanding helpful to engaging Iran. Shi'a imams and Islamic organizations are readily accessible due to the growing American Muslim population. See Appendix A for a list of leading individuals and institutions to support faith-based diplomacy.

A facilitator represents the most important individual in faith-based diplomacy and therefore should demonstrate remarkable qualifications. In addition to understanding multiple religious traditions and political structures, a facilitator must remain impartial, respectful, and exude patience.<sup>253</sup> Canon Trond Bakkevig attributes success in facilitating Israeli-Palestinian peace to his ability to listen, network with government officials, and to translate concerns, when necessary, in more meaningful and acceptable ways.<sup>254</sup> He believes the ultimate goal of a facilitator is to become obsolete, superfluous to the process. Good candidates for facilitators include Scandinavian clergy, Turkish clergy, and Vatican clergy due to their respect in peacemaking and neutrality.

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<sup>253</sup>Bakkevig, "Religious dialogue and the quest for peace in the Middle East," 3.

<sup>254</sup>Ibid.

## Prepare

Preparing for faith-based diplomacy is a life-long process for the participants; however, several steps should be taken to improve success. Before the first engagement, the facilitator should suggest broad goals, a code of conduct, and timeline to both the United States and Iran to garner buy-in to the process. It is important to meet on Iran's terms, which can be facilitated by agreeing to locations comfortable to their delegation. Holding meetings in Qom, at the modern Aal-Olbayt Institute, could be a suitable location given neutrality to politics by Javad Shahrestani, the institute's founder.<sup>255</sup> Religious delegations sponsored by the IRGC and the MCC have visited Qom for engagements in the past decade without difficulty. Shahrestani's satellite institutes in London or Beirut are other possible meeting locations. It is essential during the preparation phase that the goals of faith-based diplomacy are presented with transparency to both governments. For the United States, this is to ensure the Iran Project nests with overall diplomatic goals. For Iran, the explicit approval of the Supreme Leader is necessary to ensure participation and safety to their delegation.

Engagement locations and participants should be identified months in advance to allow adequate preparation. Iran's conservative state clergy would add authenticity to the process; however, no stipulations should be made pertaining to Iran's participants as this could undermine the process. See Appendix B for a listing of key elites that could participate on Iran's behalf. Preparation activities should include cultural training, religious law training, and negotiations training. Training should include mock sessions that review protocol and possible discussion topics. Consultation by the ICRD, renowned

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<sup>255</sup>Khalaji, "The Last Marja," 10.

facilitators, and Shi'a scholars is recommended. These early efforts will help manage emotions, remove cognitive biases, and establish expectations for future engagements. Preparations should also include academic work, where faith-based diplomats conduct an analysis of religious sources to the Iran-U.S. estrangement.

Faith-based diplomats must also become experts of policy and the issues that divide Iran and the United States. Instruction by policy institutes and meetings with government officials can help improve understanding of contentious issues, as well as the common interests that support cooperation. Many experts, including former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, have focused attention on common interests with Iran which afford cooperation.<sup>256</sup> “Red team” activities that challenge religious and political concepts from Iran’s perspective are another vital component to thorough preparation.

#### Execute and Assess

Faith-based diplomacy must proceed with transparency to both Iran and the United States. With Iran’s Parliament elections in 2012 and presidential election in 2013, suitable pre-conditions may not exist until after Iran’s internal dynamics settle in the election aftermath. Beginning rapprochement activities today could enhance principled standing before these elections, an unfavorable outcome from both the U.S. perspective and the people of Iran. It is imperative that the facilitator prevents the manipulation of religion for traditional diplomacy, a perception that if allowed to grow, could quickly end

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<sup>256</sup>Henry A. Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 196; Sadjadpour, “Talking to Tehran: With Whom, About What, and How?,” 21-38.



engagements.<sup>257</sup> The facilitator's abilities to foster relationships early-on, remove one-sided agendas, and invoke patience are critical to sustaining the process. Any attempts to hasten to seminal issues or a grand bargain are prone to fail. Faith-based diplomacy requires patience, and enduring the frustrations of difficult socialization in the early stages.

Faith-based diplomacy fosters better understanding of grievances and socializing cooperative mind-sets, transformations that may take months or years. The ability to contact official policymakers in order to influence their understanding and biases is critical throughout the execution of faith-based diplomacy. Acceptable communication techniques include conferences, reports, and direct contact with official mentors. Assessing outcomes and devising new strategies for future meetings requires constant reflection and debate within the Iran Project's inner circle. A permanent staff should manage the administrative, financial, and logistical requirements of faith-based diplomacy.

Assessments and communication with official mentors is critical for the transmission of concepts to policy and achieving goals for rapprochement. An international coalition, especially support of European partners, will weigh on any policy developments. With the role of the Supreme Leader unlikely to change post-Khamenei, a grand initiative between heads of state is the best method to exploit a breakthrough.<sup>258</sup>

President Nixon's breakthrough with China and President Reagan's breakthrough with

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<sup>257</sup>Appleby et al., "Engaging Religious Communities Abroad," 8.

<sup>258</sup>For more on five potential scenarios that could develop in post-Khamenei Iran, see: Alireza Nader, David E. Thaler, S. R. Bohandy, *The Next Supreme Leader: Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011).

the Soviet Union are examples where a head of state prevailed as a result of the conditions set by creative diplomacy.

Faith-based diplomacy is an opportunity for dialogue that can begin to mend years of tensions between Iran and the United States. Faith based diplomacy should strive to improve understanding and rapport with Iran, a vital part to the overall Iran strategy. With determination and patience, faith-based diplomatic efforts can open the door for more traditional diplomatic efforts and lasting policy changes. If conducted with full transparency, and free of political manipulation, faith based diplomacy can serve as the catalyst to more responsible behavior by Iran and increased stability in the Middle East. Success in an Iran Project could also set forth a roadmap to peace for other conflicts where religion is a significant factor in conflict.

## APPENDIX A

### LEADING INSTITUTIONS TO SUPPORT FAITH-BASED DIPLOMACY

There are a number of government and non-government institutions capable of supporting faith-based diplomacy. Support is possible through direct participation, assistance in planning and strategies, financial backing, and hosting engagements. The foremost place for faith-based dialogue to occur is at the Vatican upon invitation by Pope Benedict XVI. Both Iran and the United States maintain diplomatic corps at the Vatican capable of engaging in faith-based dialogue or hosting delegations. As a distinct religious scholar within the Vatican's ecumenical environment, Ambassador Diaz is capable of faith-based dialogue with Iran's large diplomatic corps.

#### American Clergy and Islamic Organizations

Several leading American Catholics are suitable to participate in faith-based diplomacy with Iran. An ideal participant is Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, former Archbishop to Washington, D.C. Cardinal McCarrick is well-respected by U.S. government institutions and has a remarkable history working with foreign countries on contentious issues. He has previously met Iranian clergy and visited Qom, which furthers his credibility with Iran. Another possible faith-based diplomat is the charismatic Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York City.<sup>259</sup> His residence near the United Nations also avails him to regular meetings with Iranian delegations in New York.

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<sup>259</sup>CBS News, "Archbishop Dolan: New face of the church?" *60 Minutes*, 17 March 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/03/17/60minutes/main20044218.shtml> (accessed 1 May 2011). Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York City is referred to as the American Pope by American Catholic scholars and journals.

There are many American Muslims and Islamic organizations that can advise or assist in faith-based diplomacy with Iran. Listed in the table that follows are Shi'a leaders and institutions that maintain respect and confidence with the U.S. State Department. Sunni leaders, such as the popular Imam Feisel Abdul Rauf (9/11 mosque/cultural center), are not as preferred to serve as advisors/emissaries to the Shi'a clergy in Iran. The State Department maintains an active list of American Muslims who they trust assisting with their domestic and international Muslim engagement programs.

#### State Department

The Special Representative to Muslim Communities, Farah Pandith, engages Muslim communities throughout the world.<sup>260</sup> Ms. Pandith meets with government entities, but her efforts generally focus at the grass-roots level.<sup>261</sup> Her goals are to strengthen societies, mainly through people to people contacts with the youth. Ms. Pandith also sends American Muslims to foreign countries to speak on behalf of their Muslim communities and to explain American foreign policy.<sup>262</sup> American Muslims are perceived favorably and maintain legitimacy in foreign Muslim communities which enhances their positive messages and themes.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup>In 2010, Farah Pandith, Special Representative to Muslim Communities, visited Iraq, Egypt, and Turkey in the Middle East.

<sup>261</sup>U.S. Department of State, "Special Representative to Muslim Communities," <http://www.state.gov/s/srmc/index.htm> (accessed 18 April 2011).

<sup>262</sup>Karen Chandler, Office of the Special Representative to Muslim Communities, phone interview by author, 19 April 2011.

<sup>263</sup>Ibid.

The Bureau of Near East Asia Affairs (NEA), led by Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman, focuses directly on foreign policy and diplomacy with Iran. This Bureau also includes the Office of Iranian Affairs with more than ten staff members capable of coordinating an engagement strategy with Iran; however, NEA and the Office of Iranian Affairs are not intrinsically capable of prolonged negotiations or faith-based diplomacy.<sup>264</sup> Their understanding of Iran is limited by not having diplomatic presence in Tehran to observe day to day activities of the Iranian Regime.<sup>265</sup> In a phone interview, the Office of Iranian Affairs stated that there is no compelling reason to approach Iran's government as a deeply religious institution. This Office views Iran's state clergy as secular politicians who have used religious titles to gain favor in the government.<sup>266</sup>

The Office of International Religious Freedom monitors religious persecution and discrimination throughout the world. This office reports religious persecutions to U.S. policymakers and promotes religious freedoms and reconciliation programs directly with foreign governments and through religious and human rights groups. This office is staffed with around 30 individuals and has called on many American Muslims, including imams, and Islamic organizations to facilitate this office's efforts.<sup>267</sup> In the 2011 Annual

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<sup>264</sup>Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia?*, 77.

<sup>265</sup>Member of the Bureau of Near East Asia, U.S. Department of State, phone interview by author, 10 May 2011.

<sup>266</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup>Birdsall, phone interview by author.

Report on International Religious Freedom, Iran is listed under “countries of particular concern.”<sup>268</sup>

### Non-Governmental Organizations

Non-governmental organizations that have experience with faith-based diplomacy with Iran include the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Both organizations started projects with Iran that furthered mutual understanding and demonstrated a commitment to peace. With new incentives to reinvigorate these projects, these organizations have available models and knowledge of how to improve the process of faith-based diplomacy. These organizations also maintain respected relationships with the U.S. government.

The Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East (FRRME), a British charity that supports the Anglican Vicar of Baghdad, brought together Iraq’s diverse religious groups to collaborate on solutions to culturally and religiously inspired problems. During the surge of U.S. forces in Iraq, conferences to discuss reconciliation across sectarian lines were held in Baghdad (June 2007) and Cairo (August 2007). In January 2010, FRRME arranged an emergency meeting of the High Council of Religious Leaders in Iraq to address the increase in violence directed at Christian communities.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>268</sup>U.S. Department of State, “Countries of Particular Concern,” Religious Freedom Office, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/irf/c13281.htm> (accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>269</sup>Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East, “News, Copenhagen Crisis Summit: Final Statement,” <http://frme.org/latest-news> (accessed 1 May 2011).

These conferences resulted in agreements to work towards ending violence and foster positive religious messages from clerics at all levels.<sup>270</sup>

The ICRD advocates a faith-based approach to conflict resolution as explained in chapter 4. This organization addresses only identity-based conflicts where traditional diplomatic efforts failed. The ICRD's investment of time and resources is based on prescriptive criteria, such as overall possible impact, minimizing duplicative efforts, and strategic benefits to the United States. Their most recent project in April 2011 assembled leaders from the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan with American evangelicals for a faith-based reconciliation seminar. A second, more-expansive meeting is scheduled for later this Spring and may include Brotherhood members from Egypt, Yemen, Kuwait and Morocco.<sup>271</sup>

The MCC, a Christian charity focused on peace-building, has taken a similar approach to engagement with Iran as the ICRD. In 2007, MCC sponsored an ecumenical delegation of thirteen religious leaders to Iran for faith-based dialogue with senior Iranian officials. Meeting participants from Iran included President Ahmadinejad, Foreign Minister Mottaki, and Ayatollah Mohammed Emami-Kashani, a senior aid to the Supreme Leader.<sup>272</sup> Following the trip, the delegation shared their experience with

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<sup>270</sup>Griffin, phone interview by author.

<sup>271</sup>ICRD, "April Update," [http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=41](http://www.icrd.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=41) (accessed 24 April 2011).

<sup>272</sup>Participants in the meetings are displayed in a PBS special, "Talking to Iran," 23 March 2007, <http://www.pbs.org/now/shows/312/> (accessed 1 May 2011).

members of Congress to urge engagement.<sup>273</sup> They also produced an information packet, “words, not war, with Iran,” which advocates contacting U.S. government officials to encourage direct engagement with Iran.<sup>274</sup> The MCC also sponsors education exchanges between Mennonite and Iranian universities and arranges religious conferences in Canada and Iran for international religious dialogue.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup>Sojourners, “Words, Not War, With Iran,” [http://www.sajo.net/index.cfm?action=action.wnw&item=wnw\\_main](http://www.sajo.net/index.cfm?action=action.wnw&item=wnw_main) (accessed 1 May 2011).

<sup>274</sup>Sojourners, “Words, Not War with Iran: Study and Action Guide,” September 2007, [http://www.faithfulsecurity.org/pdf/wnw\\_toolkit.pdf](http://www.faithfulsecurity.org/pdf/wnw_toolkit.pdf) (accessed 1 May 2011).

<sup>275</sup>Mennonite Central Committee, “Middle East,” <http://middleeast.mcc.org/> (accessed 1 May 2011).



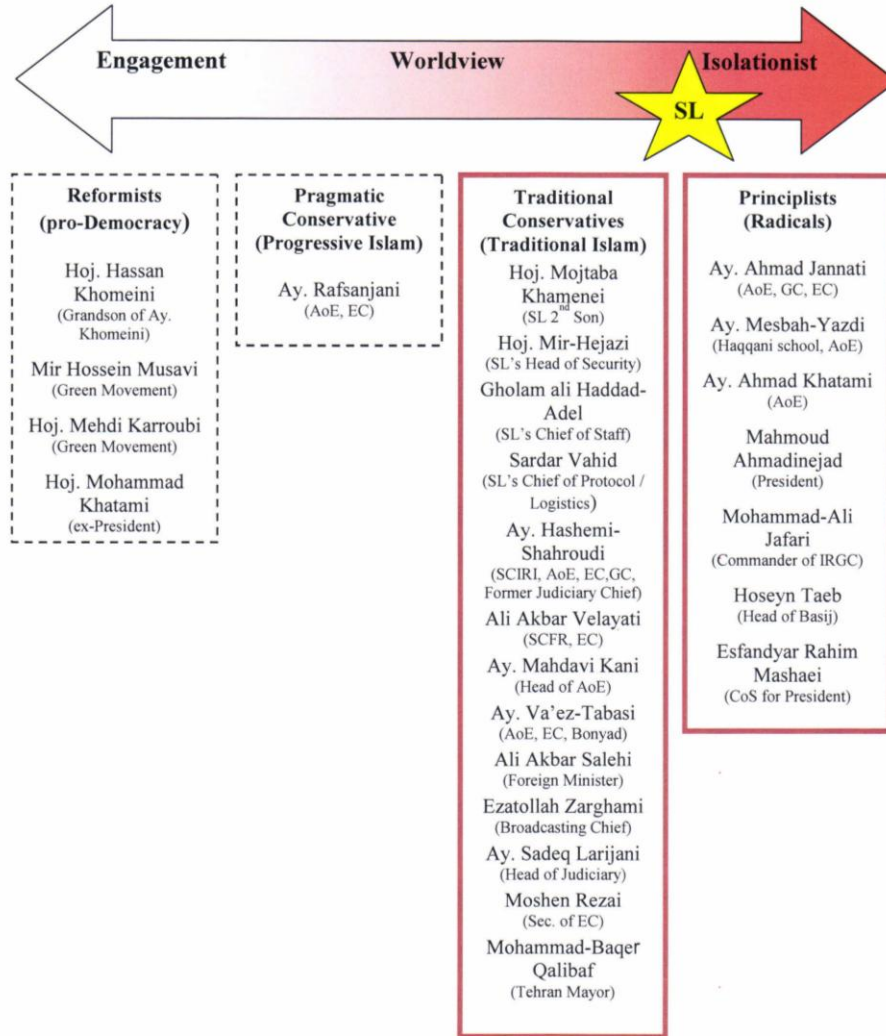
Table 2. Leading Institutions to Support Religious Leader Engagements

Government Institutions	Non-Governmental Organizations	Islamic Institutions	Other
<b>President</b>  <b>Secretary of State</b>  <b>Dept. of State</b> -Bureau of NEA -Special Rep. to Muslim Communities -Office of International Religious Freedom  <b>Ambassadors / Special Envoys</b> -George Mitchell -Dennis Ross  <b>Members of Congress</b> -Keith Ellison (D-MN) -Andre Carson (D-IN)  <b>Military Chaplains</b> -COL LaMar Griffin, USA -CPT Philip Pelikan, USN  <b>Vatican</b> -Pope Benedict XVI -Ambassador Miguel Diaz  <b>United Nations</b> -UN Human Rights Council  <b>Organization of the Islamic Conference</b> -Rashad Hussein	<b>Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East</b> -Canon Andrew White -Peter Marsden  <b>Mennonite Central Committee</b> -J. Daryl Byler -Edward Martin  <b>International Center for Religion and Diplomacy</b> -Dr. Douglas Johnston  <b>U.S. Institute of Peace</b> -Robin Wright  <b>Chicago Council on Global Affairs</b>  <b>Gulen Institute / Institute of Interfaith Dialogue</b>  <b>Gulf/2000</b> -Gary Sick  <b>Gulf Research Center</b>  <b>Institute of Near East &amp; Gulf Military Analysis</b> - Khaled Abdullah Al Bu-Ainnain	<b>American Shi'a Muslim Clergy</b> -Imam Husham al-Husainy -Imam Hassan al-Qazwini -Imam Moustafa al-Qazwini  <b>Al-Khoei Foundation</b> -Shayk Fadhil Sahlani  <b>Council of Shi'a Muslim Scholars of North America</b> -Sayyid Muhammad Baqir Kashmiri  <b>American Islamic Congress</b> -Zainab Al-Suwaij  <b>Muslim American Society</b> -Ahmad Esmat El Bendary  <b>Universal Muslim Association of America</b> -Ehtisham Abidi  <b>Muslim Congress</b> - Ali Abbas	<b>American Christian Clergy</b> -Cardinal Theodore McCarrick -Cardinal Timothy Dolan  <b>National Iranian American Council</b> -Trita Parsi  <b>Iranian Americans &amp; Scholars</b> -Mehdi Kalaji -Abbas Milani -International Society for Iranian Studies  <b>Think Tanks</b> -American Foreign Policy Project -Brookings Institute (Saban Center) -Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran -Center for a New American Security -Campaign for a New American Policy on Iran  <b>World Conference of Religion and Peace</b> - Prince El Hassan bin Talal  <b>Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land</b> -Canon Trond Bakkevig

Source: Created by author

## APPENDIX B

### WORLDVIEW OF IRAN'S POLITICAL FACTIONS AND KEY ELITES



*Source:* Created by author with information from David E. Thaler et al., *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2010), 41; Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani, "Iran's Political Elite," in *The Iran Primer: Power Politics and U.S. Policy*, ed. by Robin Wright (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2010) 221-226.

Key: Ay. – Ayatollah, CoS – Chief of Staff, EC – Expediency Council, GC – Guardian Council, Hoj. – Hojatoleslam (rank below Ayatollah), IRGC – Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, SCIRI – Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, SCFR – Strategic Council for Foreign Relations, SL – SL

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